



## Families First

Building a blueprint for supporting British families

The Family Commission looks to find new answers to age-old problems. It has set itself the goal of creating a new blueprint for supporting families in Britain.

A YouGov poll\* for The Family Commission shows that local public services are not viewed as 'family friendly' by the majority of people. **When asked which of the following public services are 'family friendly', respondents said:**

- 3% job centres
- 8% local councils
- 27% childcare
- 30% hospitals
- 40% GP surgeries
- 45% schools
- 17% felt that none of the above services were 'family friendly'
- 18% didn't know

**When asked about how they would change local services to become more 'family friendly', presented with a series of options:**

- 65% selected more evening and weekend opening hours
- 51% making accessing services less complicated
- 43% more activities for children after school
- 42% having people available to give help and advice when needed
- 23% to be more welcoming to dads
- 0% to be less welcoming to dads
- 19% more input [from them] over how services are run
- 1% other
- 9% don't know
- 5% not applicable

We are recommending:

### ➔ Putting families first

- ➔ A commitment from all political parties to put families first.
- ➔ A priority for public services to build a new 'families first' approach.
- ➔ A new 'Family Well-being' framework for all those who are working with families.
- ➔ Ensuring families get the help and support they need to balance their family and work responsibilities.

### ➔ Getting behind families

- ➔ Extension of children's centres to provide local support for extended families, with best practice on engaging dads and grandparents, spread around the country.
- ➔ A strengthened focus on prevention, with new incentives put in place for Children's Trusts to rebalance family services and support towards early intervention and prevention.
- ➔ New approaches put in place to identify, strengthen and engage with vulnerable families, giving them earlier support such as Intensive Family Support.
- ➔ Families being involved in devising their own solutions through mechanisms such as Family Group Conferencing, with all families offered a Family Group Conference as a right when concerns have been identified.
- ➔ Learning from innovation around the country to bring professionals together in local family support teams of social workers, health visitors, midwives, children's centre staff, schools and wider professionals to coordinate and support work with families in their area.

### ➔ Supporting families to work

- ➔ Better information, advice and practical help for working parents in looking for work and finding the childcare and support they need.
- ➔ More help for families to return to work through a reform of the benefit system, to ensure families are always better off in work, with more help for the long-term unemployed to sustain and progress in employment.
- ➔ More practical help and advice for employers, particularly small businesses, in managing part-time and flexible working.
- ➔ More help for parents through childcare that is flexible and affordable, with childcare available beyond office hours and flexible ways of paying.



\*Source: YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,024 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken 15-17 Feb 2010. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

**The Family Commission is proposing the first stages of a new blueprint for supporting families in Britain which recognises the reality of modern family life and puts families first. Our aim is to help families flourish in every aspect of their lives with support that ‘gets behind’ families – giving them the help they need, when they need it.**

Ask families and many will tell you that life can be hard, particularly given the challenging economic times experienced in the last 12 months. The demands of modern life can at times seem unrelenting to families who want to build a future for their children that gives them every opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Whilst family life has changed over recent decades, there is little doubt that at best our families remain one of the most important elements of our lives, the buffer and link between individuals and community and a source of support and strength. Family members often turn to each other for help in difficult times and many families rise to this challenge. The Family Commission believes this is to be welcomed as clear evidence that family life in Britain is not in crisis.

Often the debate about supporting families reveals a dichotomy between an approach which is pro-family and one which is pro-state. This is not what families have told The Family Commission. We have been inspired by meeting families that have pulled together, across the generations, to care for children or elderly relatives; by parents who have pieced together an intricate set of caring arrangements in order to juggle work and family life; and by those who are turning their lives around through drawing on the support of their family. Yet families still say they need help and support to do this.

Families say that current services aren't always hitting the mark. Some can be too inflexible, making family life more difficult than it needs to be. Other services too often take a 'we know best' approach – failing to understand that families are frequently best placed to know what would make the difference. This can make families feel judged, or as if they are being treated as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. We have been consistently told by families that help is still not accessible until they hit crisis point, with earlier cries for help seeming to fall on deaf ears.

So, the answer is not to roll back the state, leaving families to sink or swim by themselves. The answer is that public services have to understand families and get behind them by building on their strengths; promoting economic independence; supporting aspirations; prioritising well-being; and championing family friendly communities. And most importantly, being on hand early on to prevent families hitting rock bottom rather than responding to one crisis after another.

The good news is that turning services ‘inside out’ in this way will benefit not only individual families, but communities and the public purse. There is an increasing body of evidence which shows the social and economic return on investment that tackles the root causes of social decay. We know that investment in the early years narrows the attainment gap; we know that spending on the causes of crime reduces the cost of offending; we know that supporting families to stay together and cope with their problems reduces the social care bill. Our final blueprint will aim, for the first time, to entrench this approach at the heart of family policy.

**The Commission is proposing a blueprint that:**

- ➔ Understands and supports the aspiration that runs through most families: parents want to give their children the best they possibly can.
- ➔ Sees families, including extended families, as a major resource which can help solve or prevent problems.
- ➔ Ensures services are provided and communities are organised in a way that goes with the grain of family life, rather than working against it.
- ➔ Ensures universal services like GPs, schools, children's centres and health visitors are working together to ensure all families know there is somewhere to go for help.
- ➔ Understands that families have strengths and believes that building on those strengths is the best way to help them flourish.
- ➔ Understands that families should have their views listened to when shaping decisions which affect their lives.
- ➔ Recognises that there will be some families who are not able to cope and that action will be needed to protect their children.
- ➔ Provides help early on, before problems become crises.
- ➔ Understands that offering children the best start when they are very young offers them the best chance in life.
- ➔ Spends public money wisely – with a higher proportion of money spent on the services that prevent problems, saving money down the line.

**In the first nine months of its work, The Family Commission has found that families remain positive about their future; pragmatic and imaginative in the way they cope with the challenges of modern life; insightful about their own problems; and committed to doing their best for the youngest, oldest and most vulnerable members of their family.**

**Early themes**

During the first half of the Commission's work we have focused on three key areas:

- Families across the generations
- Families who are vulnerable and under stress
- Working families and the impact of the recession

This paper sets out The Family Commission's interim findings drawn from:

- Around 3,000 surveys
- Study visits to Leeds, Blackpool, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Essex, Camden and Dundee
- Focus groups with parents, young people, older people and professionals
- Desk research

**Acknowledgements**

The Commission would like to thank the staff and families who have been so willing to talk to us and share their thoughts and experiences. We look forward to continuing this dialogue.

## Families across the generations

Families have changed and continue to change. There are more lone parent and step families now than in previous generations; the marriage rate has fallen to its lowest level in 100 years; within five years the majority of British babies will be born to unmarried parents; divorce is amongst the highest in Europe, but at its lowest since 1979 and people are having their children later; the size of the average household has decreased; and there are more mixed race families and more children born outside the UK.<sup>1</sup>

It is not just the structure of families that is changing; the shape of families is changing too. Decreased family size means fewer uncles, aunts and cousins but increased longevity means more generations of the same families alive at any one time. This means that families are becoming thin and long – bean poles – with far more scope for intergenerational relationships. Today a family can easily encompass an 84 year old great-grandma, an active 62 year old granny, a 40 year old mum and a 13 year old daughter.

The Family Commission has heard repeatedly of the value that many people place in their extended family. Young people at a North London focus group told us, where they had grandparents living locally, they valued that love and support.

From older people the same message has been heard loud and clear. Indeed, polling shows an increase in grandparents describing themselves as friends or confidantes of their grandchildren, from 30% in 2003 to 58% in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

### Families have told us that:

- **Families are a huge resource and need to be recognised as part of the solution.**
- **Public services need to do more to recognise the extended family.**
- **Extended families need help and support in their caring and work responsibilities and should not be seen as a cheap alternative to formal or professional care.**

Whilst The Family Commission has been told that extended family is important, there appears to be a gap between the aspirations for the quality of those relationships and the busy reality of everyday life. In polling for the Commission last year we found that half of Britons (49%) only see extended family members (including grandparents) twice a year or less frequently. This goes up to 58% for those who are 55+. Nearly one in three (30%) only see their extended family members once a year or less frequently.

On the other hand, there is widespread recognition that grandparents in particular are the mainstay of practical support and everyday life in many families. A recent RIAS *21st Century Grandparenting* study has shown that the UK's 14 million grandparents are providing £5.2 billion in free childcare annually. Grandparents provide 26% of childcare in the UK, the highest amount, with formal daycare providing 17%.<sup>3</sup>

These contradictions may be explained through a polarisation of lifestyles. Geographical mobility has dramatically changed over the last few decades, with a greater proportion of the population studying at university and moving around the country to find work. Couples are then putting down roots and having children in these new locations which mean extended family networks may be far away.

Whilst the general trend is for younger, better educated people to be mobile, the effects of the recession appear to be complicating the picture. A significant number of young people are moving back in with their parents after university to save money, or lived at home while studying at university – the so called 'Kippers' (kids in parents' pockets eroding retirement savings). 25% of men aged 25 to 29 now live with their parents, the highest figures in the last 20 years. As for people moving out, in 2002 almost a third of people lived less than 15 minutes journey away from their parents, and around two-thirds lived less than an hour away, with only one in eight moving more than 200km away.<sup>4</sup>

### Families that care

Whilst for many grandparents the opportunity to spend time with their grandchildren – whether minding or caring for them – is a pleasure and a source of great enjoyment, some grandparents have told The Family Commission that it can be a struggle.

200,000 grandparents are raising their grandchildren themselves (known as 'kinship carers'), most in difficult family circumstances and with little or no support. Children brought up in kinship care have similar multiple adversity experiences to those in foster care. More than a third of grandparents who look after their grandchildren to prevent them being taken into care live below the poverty line, and three quarters experience financial hardship. Research found that 38% of 'grandparents carers' live on less than £200 a week.<sup>5</sup>

But we know that in the decades to come, families will need support not just to meet their childcare responsibilities. The rise of the 'sandwich generation' who juggle caring for their older parents and their own children, was one of the early issues the

Commission has sought to grapple with. A recent IPPR study reveals that almost one million people – 550,000 women and 400,000 men – have this dual role, caring for both children and elderly relations, with 62 per cent of female carers also going out to work.<sup>6</sup> In fact, due to the ageing population we now are seeing the rise of the 'club sandwich generation' with individuals finding themselves in the middle of a four generation family with perhaps an elderly parent to care for, their own children plus grandchildren to look after.

*"I have a much closer relationship with my grandchildren than I ever had with my grandparents. They thought children should be seen and not heard."*  
*Grandmother, 80s, London*

### The Family Commission is recommending:

- ➔ **Recognition and support for the caring role that extended families play by employers and public services, with best practice championed across the country.**
- ➔ **A priority for public services to build a new 'families first' approach.**
- ➔ **A new 'Family Well-being' framework for all those who are working with families.**



# Tough times

All families can go through tough times, for example when someone loses a job, there is a death in the family or when a relationship breaks down. However, for some families persistent difficulties and challenges – sometimes over decades and even generations – mean that problems can become entrenched with a gradual grinding down of their ability to ‘bounce back’ or to cope.

## Families have told us that:

- **They need help early on, before problems become crises.**
- **They want help that sees them as families and goes with the grain of family life.**
- **They want support from people who are on their side and with whom they can build a relationship of trust.**
- **They need joined up and practical support.**
- **They don't want to be stigmatised or made to feel like a failure.**
- **Support for families with disabled children is difficult to find.**
- **They want to help shape and be part of the solution.**

Despite considerable investment in public services and measures to tackle child poverty in the last decade, there remain many vulnerable families in Britain. 140,000 families experience complex and multiple problems<sup>7</sup>, and 51,000 families are homeless.<sup>8</sup> More than 250,000 children have parents who use drugs.<sup>9</sup> There are 60,000 children in care.<sup>10</sup> Four million children live in poverty.<sup>11</sup> Over one million older people feel trapped in their own home.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the number of children being killed is at its lowest since the 1970s, with a 70% drop in child homicides<sup>13</sup>; child crime is lower than ten years ago<sup>14</sup>; teen pregnancies rates are falling<sup>15</sup>; and drug and alcohol abuse figures are also reducing.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst the media stereotypes of the ‘family from hell’ on one hand and ‘hard working families’ on the other is familiar, the reality is that many families go through periods of stress and vulnerability. These families need to know that there is help available that will move them from struggling to coping and from coping to flourishing.

The Family Commission is not ‘misty-eyed’ about families and it is impossible to deny that some families may not be able to provide the best for their children. Recent high-profile cases show the tragic consequences of not acting or intervening when a family situation is out of control. Where children are at risk, action needs to be taken – decisively and backed up by confident and informed judgements and support. The families we met recognised this.

Time and time again, the Commission has heard of the difficulty families experience in getting help before they reach a crisis point. We heard how families were passed from one service to the next, struggling to get through what felt like a maze of bureaucracy. They feel a lack of trust with some professionals, whom they perceive assume the worst and act accordingly. Vulnerable families in particular have said that they need time to build relationships of trust with professionals; they also want to know that support will be with them in the long term – not just here today, gone tomorrow.

Research tells us of the importance of ensuring children get a good start in life, before they are born and in the early months and years when health and attachment to caring adults is crucial. This has informed our thinking throughout. The Commission is interested in

developments of para-professionals in public services, and believes that there needs to be an integrated family support workforce. An enhanced understanding across the professions of child development and the importance of attachment for children is key.

Families have told us how important it is to have local services for children and families offering help as problems occur. Families are also crystal clear that they do not want those services to stigmatise them or reinforce a feeling of failure. We have heard positive feedback about the value of Parent Support Advisers in some primary schools, which are a useful source of information and signposting of services. However, we have been told repeatedly that secondary schools need to do more to build the family life of their pupils into their approach to teaching and learning. Support for families with disabled children remains scarce and is an area where improvements are urgently needed.

The Family Commission has been impressed by services which truly engage with families – including those with real problems. The Family Group Conferencing approach being used in areas like Camden, and which is statutory in Ireland and New Zealand, brings together extended families, friends and community members to work out what the best solutions and actions should be and put an action plan in place to overcome crises and move forward.

Family members who have been through this process reported to the Commission real benefits from being engaged as part of the solution. The Family Commission believes that this premise should underpin all work with vulnerable families. It is not a soft option; it requires strong communication skills, a skilful, challenging, empathic and tenacious approach. This ‘strengths based’ approach is also used to powerful effect in the Intensive Family Support programmes that we have seen.

## The Family Commission is recommending:

- ➔ **Extension of children's centres to provide local support for extended families, with best practice on engaging dads and grandparents, spread around the country.**
- ➔ **A strengthened focus on prevention, with new incentives put in place for Children's Trusts to rebalance family services and support towards early intervention and prevention.**
- ➔ **New approaches put in place to identify, strengthen and engage with vulnerable families, giving them earlier support such as Intensive Family Support.**
- ➔ **Families being involved in devising their own solutions through mechanisms such as Family Group Conferencing, with all families offered a Family Group Conference as a right when concerns have been identified.**
- ➔ **Learning from innovation around the country to bring professionals together in local family support teams of social workers, health visitors, midwives, children's centre staff, schools and wider professionals to coordinate and support work with families in their area.**

# Families that work

Most families want the control, choice and opportunities afforded by economic independence. Even in families which have suffered intergenerational worklessness we have heard a strong desire for the next generation to get a job and get on in life.

Until the recession struck at the end of 2008 there were record levels of parental employment<sup>17</sup>, with significant rises in the employment rates of lone parents and mothers in couples. The Government's emphasis on work as the best route out of poverty coupled with measures to make work pay had taken the country to the brink of full employment before the credit crunch.

However, the shifts in working patterns and redundancies that have typified the recession have changed daily life for many families in Britain, demanding that parents are even more imaginative about how they juggle work and family. In some cases this is leading to a change in the balance of caring responsibilities, with anecdotal evidence showing a rise in reporting of second jobs, 'shift parenting' and 'stay at home' dads.

## Families have told us that:

- **Long working hours put a strain on family life.**
- **Flexible working is good but needs to be more of a reality for dads and poorer families.**
- **Dads' roles are changing, with more 'stay at home' dads looking after the children – in many cases as a pragmatic response to male unemployment.**
- **Formal childcare is sometimes too inflexible and 55% of families say the Government should provide more affordable childcare.**
- **With the rise in youth unemployment, children are living at home longer and starting their own families later.**

Over one million workers in Britain have a second job. This includes over 300,000 people whose primary job is already full time and many who are parents with school-aged children.<sup>18</sup>

Parents are telling us that they are 'shift parenting', working opposite shift patterns and taking it in turns to care for their children, in order to reduce childcare costs or because appropriate childcare is not available.

There has also been an increase in the role that dads are playing in childcare. Male unemployment rose most during 2009.<sup>19</sup> In some families where dads have been made redundant, mums are taking up work or increasing hours whilst dads take on the primary caring role.

Finally, those families that are able are taking a fresh look at their work-life balance; where possible taking the opportunity to reduce working hours, take unpaid leave or 'downsize'. The Bank of

England Inflation Report in August 2009<sup>20</sup> reported that working hours had fallen by 2.7% and attributed this to an increase in flexible working hours.

## Getting behind working families

Early findings from our conversations with families suggest that there is not a simple answer to the question of how you help

families juggle work and family life. For a significant number of respondents, long working hours are the biggest strain on family life. A majority of parents are telling the Commission that they feel they are not able to spend enough time with their children. This is especially true for men. This would make the case for more part-time and flexible working, which is certainly something that many parents say would help.

However, at the same time a significant strain on work and family life identified by respondents was the lack of secure employment, with over half reporting job insecurity as a major factor in destabilising work-life balance. Around 50% also reported that unemployment featured as the greatest strain on families and work. In addition, nearly a quarter reported that part-time and shift working are having a negative impact on their family and work life.

The Government has rightly put a strong emphasis on the role that work can play in lifting children and families out of poverty, but it is the economic independence that comes from secure work paid at a decent rate to which families aspire.

## The Family Commission is recommending:

- ➔ **Better information, advice and practical help for working parents in looking for work and finding the childcare and support they need.**
- ➔ **More help for families to return to work through a reform of the benefit system, to ensure families are always better off in work, with more help for the long-term unemployed to sustain and progress in employment.**
- ➔ **More practical help and advice for employers, particularly small businesses, in managing part-time and flexible working.**
- ➔ **More help for parents through childcare that is flexible and affordable, with childcare available beyond office hours and more flexible ways of paying.**

1 All statistics in this paragraph are from *Family Trends – British families since the 1950s* (2009) Family and Parenting Institute  
2 *Older People and Wellbeing* (2008) IPPR  
3 *21st Century Grandparenting study* (2009) RIAS  
4 'More young adults in their 20s and 30s living with parents than in past 20 years', 8/12/2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/dec/08/young-adults-living-parental-home-ons](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/dec/08/young-adults-living-parental-home-ons)  
5 *Statistics policy briefing paper* (2009) [www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/files/Briefing%20paper%20statistics%20july%2009.pdf](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/files/Briefing%20paper%20statistics%20july%2009.pdf)

6 *Sandwich Generation* (2009) IPPR  
7 *Families at Risk Cabinet Office Paper* (2007) [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social\\_exclusion\\_task\\_force/assets/families\\_at%20\\_risk/risk\\_data.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/families_at%20_risk/risk_data.pdf)  
8 Shelter statistics (2010) [http://england.shelter.org.uk/housing\\_issues/Creating\\_better\\_neighbourhoods/supporting\\_families\\_and\\_children](http://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_issues/Creating_better_neighbourhoods/supporting_families_and_children)  
9 *Parenting capacity and substance misuse* (2005) [www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing06/index.asp](http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing06/index.asp)

10 'Government slams councils that relocate children six times a year', 16/11/2009, [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/nov/16/government-councils-relocate-care-children](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/nov/16/government-councils-relocate-care-children)  
11 End Child Poverty statistics (2010) [www.endchildpoverty.org.uk](http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk)  
12 *Poverty and Poor Health Create Isolation in Older People* (2000) [www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=1557](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=1557)  
13 'Through a glass darkly', 04/02/2010, [www.economist.com/world/britain/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story\\_id=15452867](http://www.economist.com/world/britain/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=15452867)

14 Ibid.  
15 *Family Trends – British families since the 1950s* (2009) Family and Parenting Institute  
16 Ibid.  
17 Ibid.  
18 Office for National Statistics, [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)  
19 Ibid.  
20 *Bank of England Inflation Report* (08/2009) [www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/inflationreport/ir09aug5.ppt#1](http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/inflationreport/ir09aug5.ppt#1)

The Family Commission is developing a new framework for family well-being that will underpin our final conclusions. This is likely to include:



The Family Commission looks to find new answers to age-old problems. It sets sights high to create a policy agenda for all families for generations to come.

## The Family Commission has been asking some big questions:

1. What is life like for families in Britain today? How will this change in the future?
2. What support do families need now and in the future to fulfil their potential? Are there regional differences?
3. How can we build positive family involvement and interaction across communities and generations?
4. How should we respond to families who struggle to cope with hardship, health, relationships, employment and finances?
5. What should the role of Government, communities and employers be in supporting families?
6. What would a blueprint for support for modern families look like?

## Who is The Family Commission?



**Esther Rantzen CBE**  
Chair of Commission

**Sir William Atkinson**  
Head of Phoenix High School, West London

**Stella Creasy**  
Community Campaigner

**Meadbh Dempsey**  
Young Ambassador

**Josh Dowgill**  
Young Ambassador

**Alex Graham**  
Chief Executive and founder, Wall to Wall Productions

**Rachel Johnson**  
Journalist

**Anna Kennedy**  
Director and Founder of Autism Services

**Professor Kathleen Kiernan**  
Professor of Social Policy and Demography, University of York

**Charlotte Leslie**  
Parliamentary candidate

**Anne Longfield OBE**  
Chief Executive, 4Children

**Caroline Marsh**  
Property Investor and Channel 4 Secret Millionaire

**Seyi Obakin**  
Chief Executive, Centrepoin

**Pip O'Byrne**  
Children and Families Advisor

**Richard Reeves**  
Director, Demos

**Yvonne Roberts**  
Writer and Broadcaster

**Alexander Rose**  
Campaigner

**Jean Stogdon**  
Founder, Grandparents Plus

**Alex Timpson**  
Mother and foster parent

**John Timpson**  
Business Leader

**Karen Woodall**  
Director, The Centre for Separated Families

**Professor Sue Yeandle**  
Professor of Sociology, University of Leeds

## Have your say

The Family Commission wants to hear from as many people as possible. If you have views on families today, please let us know.

Go to [www.thefamilycommission.org.uk](http://www.thefamilycommission.org.uk) and fill in the online survey.

Submissions to The Family Commission should generally be no more than four sides of A4 and should address the six key areas outlined above.

Please send submissions to:

The Family Commission  
4Children  
City Reach  
5 Greenwich View Place  
London E14 9NN

Tel: 020 7512 2100  
Fax: 020 7512 2010  
[familycommission@4Children.org.uk](mailto:familycommission@4Children.org.uk)

The Family Commission will also be taking a limited number of oral submissions. If you would like to present your views to the inquiry in person, please write to the above address.

**We look forward to hearing from you.**