

STARTING A FAMILY REVOLUTION

Putting families in charge

The
Family
Commission



The Family Commission has asked 10,000 families what they think about family life in Britain today. This report reveals their views and what we need to do to respond.

2010 was a landmark general election for Britain's families. For the first time in our country's history, all the political manifestos put commitments to families at the heart of their platforms for government.

Yet as the Family Commission travelled the country, families told us that their daily experience was that politicians' good intentions were not effectively being translated from Whitehall to the village hall. They told us that Britain has become trapped with an outdated system that fails to understand the aspirations of families and is unable to cope with the fast paced changes of modern life. The perception of families is of a state that either ignores them or tries to take over.

There is no doubt how important families are for most of us. Indeed, families have been the first to tell us how much they value family life and the stability, support and strengths that it brings. Families remain the most important determinant of a child's life chances and as such are crucial to all our futures. We may live busier and more complicated lives than ever but the quality of our lives – including our families – is how we judge our success.

A new contract for families

At a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty, this report argues for a drastic overhaul of the dynamic between state and family in order to get behind families, recognising them as this country's most important asset. This new contract will:

- Recognise and work with the potential in all families, including those in crisis, to develop their own sustainable solutions
- Recognise the untapped value of extended families
- Require professionals to work with, not 'for', families – at an early enough point to make a genuine difference
- Recognise that families initially prefer help from their peers, friends and relatives – and embrace the ethos of the Big Society to build a network of support that reflects this.

Our conclusions map out a route to change the dynamic between family and the state – putting families in the driving seat. We are at a critical moment which will have implications for generations to come. For the Coalition Government the autumn Spending Review is a big moment, offering an opportunity to set our country on a journey to a brighter future for all British families. We urge all politicians to put families 'front and centre', to build on their assets and to instigate a revolution in family policy that will benefit us all.

“The danger is that we have forgotten that families are a huge resource. If ‘Every Child Matters’, and of course they do, we at the Family Commission believe it is time to adopt a new approach, to ask a deeper, more searching question.

“What matters to every child?” And the answer is: the family.”

Esther Rantzen CBE, Chair of the Family Commission



Pick up a newspaper on almost any day of the week and you would be forgiven for thinking that family life in Britain is in crisis and we are a society that no longer seems to value the stability and protection afforded by the family unit. The statistics tell us that marriage rates are at a record low and divorce rates are high, and Family Commission YouGov polling¹ tells us that 50% of people say they see their extended family twice or fewer times a year.

But there is something that statistics do not reveal, that families up and down the country have told us everywhere we have been – family continues to be an unparalleled source of love, support, advice and inspiration for so many of us. Respondents to our Family Commission survey put unconditional love, support and fun as top of the list of favourite things about their family.

Yet as we have talked with families and professionals, it has become clear how we are holding too many families back. We continue to be fixated with the minority of families in acute crisis with too little focus on those who are struggling to cope. Public services are over-bureaucratic and inflexible. We fail to understand the reality of modern family life, from changes in family structure and relationships to economic pressures and work. And we fail to adequately prepare parents for parenthood and then fail to support them in the most important job they can ever have.

*“The system is so complicated,
I feel like I am drowning”*
Parent

Families have told us of the impossible choices they are forced to make between children, family and work; the maze they have to navigate to get the help they need; and the lack of understanding and inflexibility they are too often faced with from professionals and public services.

Yet families also have shown us how they hold so much of the solution. 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, against the odds, through drawing on the support of their family.

Whilst finding so much to be positive about, it is important not to be sentimental about families. Some families have a negative impact which can cause real damage to their children. The Family Commission reaffirms the importance of protecting children in these circumstances. Unfortunately, despite representing a tiny minority, these are the stories that dominate our public discourse about family. As a result services are designed and resources are allocated on the basis of an overwhelming focus on families in crisis – leaving the rest of the nation’s families to sink or swim by themselves.

This report demands that we shift our perspective back towards the majority of families and give them the backup and support they are entitled to expect. It argues for a new approach to working with families that listens, challenges and gets behind them to help them build their own solutions that can be sustained in the long term.

The previous decade has seen some important foundations laid down with the growth of a wide range of family support, such as Sure Start Children’s Centres, family intervention, childcare and parenting courses which many parents have benefited from. But now these need to be remodelled, improved in innovative ways that work for families and that offer a long term saving to the taxpayers.

We know this report is published at a time of deep economic uncertainty and restraint and have been mindful of the need to avoid expensive shopping lists of new initiatives. It would be wrong to suggest that our revolution could be achieved with no up-front cost but we do believe that much could be achieved through re-prioritising existing resources. Where a shift in expenditure is required, largely to enable families to get help earlier on, a growing body of evidence suggests that it will bring forward significant savings in the long term.

If we want our families to flourish we cannot afford *not* to make this happen.

The new family terrain

As generations live longer, divorce, remarry, live alone or in civil partnerships, the diversity of the family unit has broadened in every way. This is a time of unprecedented opportunity for individuals and families. Opportunities for work, travel, education and wealth that would have been unthinkable only half a century ago.

Yet the extension of opportunities and potential can also bring its challenges. Fast paced lifestyles demand our time and energy – and in some families this can take its toll on relationships. Whilst many families succeed in getting ahead, too many still fall behind as a growing inequality of opportunity becomes increasingly evident and damaging.

Certainly, life is more complicated for many extended families as relationships, responsibilities and support arrangements have evolved in as many diverse ways as there are families. It is also the case that many do not see members of their extended families as often as they would like. For those families who are new to the UK we know that there are additional pressures and vulnerabilities.

This is the new terrain for families in Britain which demands new solutions.

THE CHALLENGES WE SET TO THOSE WHO CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN

... to the Prime Minister's Family Task Group

Every Government department must be asked to make the needs of families a top priority, and to demonstrate that they have considered how families will be affected each time decisions are made.

We want all Government actions to pass the 'Family Test' – a commitment to recognising and empowering family in everything they do – and we want the private and the voluntary sector to do the same.

... to the legal system

All too often in Britain legal proceedings split families. We recommend accessible mediation for all the family to ensure the best possible relationships are maintained.

And too often children taken into care lose touch with family members who can be a positive source of support. Other countries make it a legal requirement that a Family Group Conference is called, so the extended family is consulted and offered the chance to support the child safely. We challenge the system to put the 'family' back into family law.

... to social services

We believe that if social services focus much of their work on prevention and support, children and families have the best chance of staying together and avoiding the tragedies of neglect and abuse.

We need social workers to continue their invaluable work protecting our most vulnerable children. But we also need social services to invest more time, money and creativity in the projects which offer early intervention to prevent crisis and enable families to function and flourish. We challenge social services to work with extended families to keep children safe and support more happy and stable families.

... to local authorities

92% of our survey said their local councils were not family friendly. With unprecedented pressure on local budgets, we believe that including families in local authority plans will actually mobilise them and provide vital additional resources.

For instance, all local authorities have created Children's Centres; families have told us are a tremendous asset, but they concentrate on families with very young children. We challenge local councils to shape their services around the needs of families – 'getting behind' families with older children.

... to employers

We recognise that for many employers these are difficult times. During this recession many employers have worked with their workforce to ride out the storm and minimise job losses. This has been reflected in the dramatic rise in part time work; welcome for some, but for many a full time salary is a financial imperative.

We challenge employers to make their organisation a good place to work for families – with the understanding and support that families say they need, coupled with the real business benefits.

... to the children and families workforce

All those working with children and families need to share and develop a stronger commitment and skills base in working with families, identifying and tapping into their strengths as a basis for change.

Core skills for all children and family professionals on developing strengths based approaches should be developed. The communication skills used in Family Group Conferencing should be more broadly extended to help professionals support family decision making.

... to schools

Schools are an important part of every community. But families have told us how they often feel distanced from their children's school and learning.

We know children are more successful if their families help and support them at school. We have also seen how some schools have had a dramatic impact on the community at large, raising aspirations and achievement. So our challenge to schools is to ensure families are included in the whole school agenda.

... to healthcare professionals

Antenatal care brings midwives and other healthcare professionals into the family, which can and should establish relationships of value throughout childhood. However, there is still a feeling that some health services are inaccessible.

Many parents tell us they have to fight for their disabled children's rights – with incomprehensible forms creating a sometimes insuperable barrier. We challenge the commissioners and deliverers of health services to break down the professional boundaries and recognise that often families are experts in what is right for them.

... to all of us

If we are members of a family, all too often time, distance and working life pressures can mean we neglect those relationships. Our survey showed that half of us see our extended family twice a year or less. Almost one third of us live alone. And yet every survey of our sense of well-being and our children's mental health shows that we compare very unfavourably with our European neighbours.

We need to take action, to restore family links, make the phone call, send the birthday card, arrange the visit, bring back the fun and companionship previous generations enjoyed.

Our call for a family revolution means we must challenge current thinking, planning and delivery in every aspect of our lives.

FAMILY COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The Family Commission is proposing a new blueprint to support family life

Keeping families united

● Help for families when parents' relationships breakdown

We know that relationship breakdown and separation can be painful for children, parents and families and propose a right to mediation for all the family when this occurs to ensure the best possible relationships are maintained. We also want families to get more practical help and advice when separating, possibly by extending information provided by the Child Maintenance Options service beyond its currently narrow remit.

● A new online portal for families across the generations to provide peer support, information, advice and communication

To be run by families, for families. This national resource would provide a high profile online source of information and advice for families across the generations. A 'Netmums for families of all ages including the sandwich generation', it would utilise the knowledge, support and wisdom which is out there – creating a 'Big on-line Society'.

● Family united programmes when families are apart

We want all public services to recognise the importance of the family, including prisons where parents are separated from their children and other family. We want to see positive programmes to keep families involved and together.

“Sticking together as a family is what keeps you warm”

Kinship carer

Building great neighbourhoods for families

● A Family Test for all local authority services and developments

We want to see families considered in all aspects of their local neighbourhood – from the planning and development of new housing to local services, open spaces and transport. As local authorities face their difficult budgeting decisions this is more important than ever, with the potential to unleash the resource of families and communities everywhere.

“You have to become an expert in the system to get the help you need”

Parent

“I worry about busy roads and there aren't any open spaces – do planners not have children?”

Parent

Helping families to work and be economically independent

● A family friendly kitemark: new recognition for family friendly employers to enable families to make more informed choices when seeking work or changing jobs

Built into the existing 'Investors In People' model, this would be a new recognition for employers who provide the family friendly jobs that we know are needed whilst demonstrating the business benefits for companies too.

● Flexible leave: the right to request flexible working extended to all those with a dependent relative

Parents of children up to age 16 already have the right to request flexible working and commitments to widen this right have been made by the Coalition Government. A key priority group for further extension would be all those with a dependent relative – a sensible stepping stone on the journey to a right to request flexible working for every employee.

● Families into work support: new support for families to move off benefits and into work

Families have told us that they want the economic independence that work can bring but for many the barriers are high. Making work pay means providing more support from benefits to those in low paid work and simplifying the system. Government proposals to introduce this approach get our backing and must in our view be realised.

● Flexible childcare: new models of flexible childcare to support the increasingly flexible labour market

New flexible working demands more flexible childcare – from toddlers to teens. Many parents want to work but to do so they need affordable, reliable and flexible childcare. The Commission wants to see more flexible models of childcare developed that offer the sessions and the times needed to support parental employment.

Helping families flourish

Phoenix High School is a mixed comprehensive school located in the inner London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. In 1995, 4% of children received 5 A–C grades at GCSE. That figure is now 46% (GCSE results 2009). It is a school that faces classic 'inner-city' challenges. Sixty per cent of the children have a special educational need, 50% are eligible for free school meals and over 50 first languages are spoken.²

It helps children and families to flourish by:

- Recognising and understanding the context of the children's lives and communities

with far-reaching recommendations.

Helping families to get on

● **Children and Family Centres: all Children's Centres to be extended to become Children and Family Centres for all ages**

To create dynamic community hubs for family activities and parenting support throughout childhood – from pre-birth to 19, offering a foundation stone for the Big Society – Children's Centres must extend their brief and become Children and Family Centres. Developing social capital within communities, these Centres would become a positive focus, bringing together the community across the generations.

● **Parenting classes including support as children grow up**

Delivered in, or in partnership with, Children and Family Centres, antenatal care covering all aspects of the transition to parenthood would flow seamlessly into community based health support after the birth to ensure the crucial early months and years provide a sound foundation for life. Family Nurse Partnerships should be made available in every area. We also want more support for parents of teenagers to help them through this often difficult period.

● **Peer to peer support and mentoring in every community**

Families told us how they value support and advice from other families. We are recommending new peer to peer support groups in all communities, with mentors of all ages in and around schools and Children and Family Centres.

● **Family Outreach Workers in schools**

To make parental involvement and commitment to learning a reality for every family, the Commission calls on schools to use some of the resources provided through the new pupil premium to fund Family Outreach Workers. These workers would work with families and communities to build confidence and support families to help their children learn.

- **Understanding children who lack stability at home need stability at school**
- **Recognising the importance of non-teaching staff including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and family support to help children cope with life so that they can concentrate on learning – the school spends more than £500,000 a year on this**
- **Acknowledging some parents need help to support their children's learning – including improving their own skills**
- **Knowing that the best teachers are prepared to go the extra mile, every day, even when it is hard**

Supporting when things go wrong

● **Family Support Teams**

Teams of professionals in and around Children and Family Centres and schools would be established in areas of disadvantage. Drawing on the example of new support for families in Wales, these teams would bring together existing professionals in a new focus to prevent crisis and support families who are struggling to cope.

● **Family Intervention Projects: to resolve crisis and prevent children being taken into care**

These programmes of intense intervention have been evaluated and they work. They have also been consistently praised by the families we have met. Importantly, they demonstrate significant savings on the public purse as the costs of care are avoided. The programmes should be made available to all families whose children are at risk of being taken into care. For the most troubled families this may involve supervised accommodation to help rebuild the family unit.

● **A legal entitlement for a Family Group Conference: the right for families to shape their solutions**

We know that many families want to provide help and support for each other when things go wrong, but they don't often feel included by professionals. We want make sure that we do all we can to enable families to resolve their own problems by giving families a legal entitlement to a Family Group Conference when concerns are raised about the family.

● **Support for kinship care: a partnership with families when children are taken into care**

We want to see a strong presumption towards kinship care in most cases, with active and positive engagement to help as many families as possible care for their children. Once children are in care, we want an end to the destructive practice of separating siblings.

“Nothing worked before, nobody seemed to care, I was struggling to cope, my children were a nightmare, but now we are doing ok, things are getting better”
Parent

“We need to engage, rather than just assess”
Social worker

About the Family Commission

4Children launched the Family Commission, a major inquiry into the extended family in the 21st century, in April 2009.

The aims of the Family Commission were to untangle some of the complex realities of families in the UK, to understand how families manage in the changing world, what the state can and should be doing to help them do so, and to explore some of the tensions which people still feel. It sought to identify key aspects of support needed – from housing, financial support, child and eldercare to social services.

The Commission drew together academics, industrialists, media representatives, policy makers and specialists to examine the future of needs of families and recommend solutions going forward.

Families' views were sought across the country through surveys, regional study visits, focus groups, and written and electronic submissions. The Commission has heard from around 10,000 families in total.

What families say

69% of people say financial hardship is the biggest strain on family relationships

75% say unconditional love is their favourite thing about their family

47% say families need more advice and information when things go wrong

24% say their children's future is a concern that keeps them awake at night

55% say more flexibility from employers would help them balance work and family life

61% say that families with elder relatives do not get enough help from Government³

Who is the Family Commission?



Esther Rantzen CBE
Chair of Commission

Sir William Atkinson

Head of Phoenix High School, West London

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

Member of Parliament for Bristol North West

Anne Longfield OBE

Chief Executive, 4Children

Caroline Marsh

Property Investor and Channel 4 Secret Millionaire

Seyi Obakin

Chief Executive, Centrepoint

Pip O'Byrne

Children and Families Advisor

Yvonne Roberts

Writer and Broadcaster

Jean Stogdon

Founder, Grandparents Plus

Karen Woodall

Director, The Centre for Separated Families

For more information, including the full report:
www.4Children.org.uk

Information Helpline: 020 7512 2100

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ENDNOTES

1. YouGov survey for The Family Commission, March 2009
2. Sir William Atkinson, Family Commissioner
3. All statistics from the Family Commission Surveys 1 & 2 except for the last item from the Family Commission YouGov Poll 1