



# STARTING A FAMILY REVOLUTION

Putting families in charge

The  
**Family**  
Commission





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**REVOLUTION**  
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# About the Family Commission

## **4 Children 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 needs of families and recommend solutions going forward.

Families' views were sought around 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.

In this report the Family Commission has created a new blueprint for family support for the UK for decades to come.

### **Acknowledgments**

The Family Commission would like to thank all those who completed our surveys, including our tailored young people survey, and submitted information and evidence. In particular, we would like to thank everybody who took part in our consultation sessions and focus groups around the country. We would also like to thank the wide range of organisations and companies who have helped us distribute the survey and talk with families.

Our thanks also to all the organisations and agencies who hosted Commission visits around the country and inspired us with their excellent practice. Special thanks to Home-Start who encouraged their families and volunteers to take part in our survey.

## 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, Centrepont

### **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

## Foreword

**W**henever a tragic case of child abuse hits the headlines, when children are murdered by the very people who should love and protect them, the shock is traumatic. The trauma lives on long after the headlines have faded, the names of precious lost lives resonate still: Jasmine Beckford, Victoria Climbié, Peter Connelly. The memory of their agonizing deaths shakes us to the core as individuals and as a nation. As a result, each time we tighten up laws and processes, desperately trying to ensure that no child ever slips through the net again. For well over a decade now, we have made our mantra, 'Every Child Matters'.

The danger is that we have forgotten that families are a huge resource. By concentrating on the tragic cases, we have created a set of attitudes that far too often treats family members as if they were part of the problem; possibly dangerous, certainly less competent than the child protection experts. We should have learned from the failure of the Dangerous Dogs Act, but legislation framed out of panic doesn't work.

So given that '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.

Twenty four years ago I launched the world's first free national helpline for children, ChildLine. And for all that time I've been listening to children talking about what matters most to them – their own families.

It is true that over the last two decades family structures have changed and diversified. Marriage looks very different today. Work has invaded our private lives, so that trying to carve out the time our children need has become a real struggle. Family members are scattered around the country and sometimes the world. But children haven't changed. Each child needs someone to care for, and care about them. Families, all the

members of a family, can play that role. They certainly did in my life. My parents were my first and most influential teachers. My grandparents were my confidants and my best source of treats and entertainment. My sister was my first playmate and is still my soul-mate. It's tempting to say, "Ah yes, but those were very different times." But today in our survey families report exactly what I found in my own childhood, that the most important aspects of family life are the unconditional love, the fun and the support we give each other.

That is why today the Family Commission is calling for a family revolution. We have become convinced that it will take revolution to change the mind-set in Government, local authorities, the legal profession and among employers. In the last 18 months the Family Commission has drawn upon our national survey of families, the opinions of our Family Panel, and reports from individuals and organisations with unique tales to tell.

The Commission has heard inspirational stories of the resourcefulness and resilience of families achieving great things – sometimes against all odds. We have heard of real challenges – families fighting to get support for their disabled child, battling to keep in contact with their grandchild after their parents separate, struggling to make their voices heard. And we have heard of great sorrow, when families are separated and when relatives are out of touch. We have been shown the maze of forms, the tangle of processes that beset families when they ask for help. Obviously we are calling for change in all these individual areas, as you will see detailed our report. But overarching all, we want the nation, the state itself, to respect and cherish the strengths of the family.

The Commission is calling upon all of us as individuals to change our priorities, too. To put our own families, our extended families, on our personal agendas. To make time and space for them in our lives. One of the saddest results in our survey is the huge number of people who say they meet members of their own extended families two times a year or less.

Other countries do it better, recognise that the old and the young need each other. Why assume that schools are no-go areas for parents; only children and teachers are allowed to take an active part? Why treat



old age as a problem rather than a resource, when grandparents can become enablers, mentors, even life-savers? The isolation of so many children may be one reason British children are among the least happy in Europe. Surveys show that children prosper mentally and physically when they are part of a strong, loving family in which grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and siblings all play a part. It's a challenge, but after all what could be more important than to rise to this challenge, here and now.

Of course the Commission recognises that not all families have this potential. But the fact is that we seem to have lost sight of the truth, that toxic families are a tiny minority. Because of the traumatic headlines, they have pulled the focus away from the vast majority of families who may be juggling time, and struggling with finances, but have the potential to save the country billions of pounds in state intervention if only we allow them to become a resource rather than treating them as a danger or an obstacle.

Over the last 18 months as Chair of the Family Commission I have had the privilege of talking to families all over Britain about their lives today. I am very grateful to all of those who helped us with this very important research. To the thousands of families who have so generously and honestly shared their experiences and their views. To the brilliant people who are running exceptional projects, and invited us to visit and see them in action. To our Family Panel who came together to 'road test' our ideas and give us their views. To the hard working Family Commissioners who have brought such energy, insight and creativity to this report. Yes, Every Child Matters. But what matters to every child, is their family.



**Esther Rantzen CBE**  
Chair of Commission

# Introduction

## Starting a family revolution

**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. For the first time ever, the needs and views of the family made their mark across the political spectrum with a clear understanding that the family is central to the kind of society that we want to be.

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 – either on their backs or nowhere to be seen.

**This report warns that as a country we are failing families, with serious social consequences that none of us can afford to ignore.**

At a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty, this report argues that a drastic overhaul of the dynamic between the state and family is needed to get behind and empower families, recognising them as the most important asset that this country has. 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 – collaborating, not directing, at an early enough point to make a genuine difference

- Recognise that families initially prefer help from their peers, friends and relatives. A new contract will embrace the ethos of the Big Society, and build a network of support that reflects this preference.

Families tell us that they have many of the answers – but too often the professionals do not listen. We have found excellent examples of effective programmes that can demonstrate their success with long term savings. We propose that all policies that impact on the family should be tested against the four criteria above and amended accordingly.

The shift needed to create this new contract is seismic. It means overturning the template for family policy for the past several decades. It challenges Government, council leaders, teachers, social services, the legal profession and indeed all of us as individuals. It requires an overhaul of all aspects of our public life. We need to start a family revolution today.

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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.

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. We still have public services that are over-bureaucratic and inflexible, which leave families to jump through hoops and fall through cracks. We fail to understand the reality of modern family life, from the changes in family structure and relationships to economic pressures and work. We continue to view parents and children as individual 'units' rather than members of families and communities. We see families predominately as consumers, instead of participants. And we fail to adequately prepare parents for parenthood and then fail to support them in the most important job they can ever have. What happens within families has an effect on our wider community life – there is a link between private lives and public policy.

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, intransigence and inflexibility they are too often faced with from the housing office to the school reception. Families are clear that that they want and welcome the right kind of support, that empowers rather than diminishes, but they feel that the system is not designed to allow that to happen.

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.

Of course whilst finding so much to be positive about, it is important not to be sentimental about families. It is also a fact that some families have a negative impact which can cause real damage to their children and others. The Family Commission has its eyes open to the toxic nature of some families and the unimaginable cruelty that they are capable of inflicting. We recognise and reaffirm the importance of protecting children in these circumstances.

But 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. At its heart it believes that the vast majority of families – even those facing significant challenges – can be helped if they are offered the right kind of support early on, when it is most powerful. To achieve lasting gains which benefit families, community and the public purse, a new paradigm of involving

families in enacting change in their lives themselves has to be the way forward.

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 and added to in innovative ways that work for families and that offer more to the community as a whole, at a long term saving to the taxpayers. We need to work with families in a more inclusive way, not just within the narrow confines of the state. An innovative collaborative approach with families, community, public and private sectors is required.

In 1998, for the first time, Government entered into the private domain of the family with the Green Paper 'Supporting Families'. It promised families advice and support, a reduction in child poverty, better work-life balance and a strong focus on tackling domestic violence, truancy and school age pregnancy.

In the years since then a significant amount of legislation and measures including the 2004 Children's Bill which established Every Child Matters have been introduced: parenting support, support for carers, child tax credits, Sure Start and Children's Centres. These services have provided valuable support for many families and are increasingly part of the architecture of local services.

However the professional emphasis has been on an atomised approach; a narrow view of what constitutes the family; a lack of joined up services and a deficit model of intervention – "What's going wrong?" – rather than working with the family and the assets it has. We now need to work with families in a new, more inclusive way, not just within the narrow confines of the state, in a fresh spirit of collaboration and innovation.

Our conclusions map out a route to change the dynamic between family and the state – putting families in the driving seat. Our proposals come 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. For the Labour Opposition, the new leader has the chance to set out a clear vision for taking Britain forward. 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 scale of change that has taken place both in family structures and family dynamics over recent decades is enormous. 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 but also of challenge and inequality. Opportunities for work, travel, education and wealth are now available in ways that would have been unthinkable only half a century ago. Our life choices and decisions are in many ways more open than ever before. With the advance of technology and mobility our personal worlds are vastly expanded, with the potential for us to strike out as individuals in all that we do.

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 some 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. In Family Commission research, half of us say that we only see our extended family members two times a year at most. 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.

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 with good leadership, creativity, commitment and the genuine involvement of families, 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.

We know that investment in the early years of a child's life narrows the attainment gap, builds lifelong emotional resilience and sets a strong foundation to reduce health and life inequalities; 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 early reduces the bill for social services.

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

# The challenges and recommendations

**W**e challenge all those that can make a difference for families to make it happen.

## A challenge 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. Only then will Britain become the family friendly country all the Political Parties said they want to see.

## A challenge to the legal system

In Britain, the legislative framework is clear that for example, extended family members should be fully considered as potential foster carers for children who cannot live with their parents. However, we have heard from families that all too often in England legal proceedings split families, pitching parents against each other, ignoring the extended family and isolating children. We recommend accessible and available mediation for all the family to ensure the best possible relationships are maintained.

And too often children taken into care completely 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 that the extended family is consulted and offered the chance to support the child safely within the family. We challenge the system to put the 'family' back into family law.

## A challenge 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. However 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 even flourish. We are challenging social services to work **with** extended families to keep children safe and to support more happy and stable families.

## A challenge to local authorities

A massive 92% of our survey said their local councils were **not** family friendly. At this time of 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, which 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 – in particular, really 'getting behind' families with older children. The extended family (including grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) also needs to be valued and welcomed as a key resource for both younger and older children.

## A challenge 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 which is 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.

## A challenge 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.

## **A challenge 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 – especially as children go to secondary school.

We know that 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.

## **A challenge to healthcare professionals**

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

Many parents tell us they have to fight for their disabled children's rights. They say the plethora of incomprehensible forms that have to be completed creates 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.

## **A challenge to all of us**

If we are members of a family, all too often the pressures of time, distance and the demands of a working life can mean we neglect those relationships. Our survey showed that half of us see our extended family two times a year or less. Almost one third of us live alone. And yet every survey into 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 this seriously. 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 that previous generations enjoyed. An aging population need not be regarded simply as a problem – they can provide respite care, baby sitting, friendship to an overstretched parent or to a lonely child and many other benefits.

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

## Recommendations

### 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 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 prisoners are separated from their families. We want to see positive programmes to keep families involved and together.

## 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 dependant 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 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 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.

## **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 projects 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.

## **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.



**'We want a fair deal  
for families of every  
shape and size'**

Liberal Democrat  
manifesto, 2010



**'We will support all  
families in a rapidly  
changing world'**

Labour Party  
manifesto, 2010



**'We will make Britain  
the most family  
friendly country  
in Europe'**

Conservative Party  
manifesto, 2010



# 1: Families in Britain



## The new family terrain

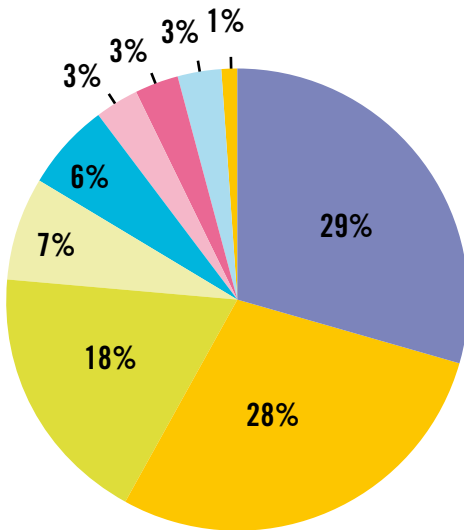
**T**he last century has seen massive change to the UK's population, household makeup and families.

The population size in 1901 was 38.3 million and the average family contained 3.5 children. By 2009, the latest figures available, the population was 61.8 million, with the average number of children per family being 1.8.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time in UK history there are now more over 65s living in the UK than under 16s. This is a trend that is only set to increase with the proportion of population under the age of 16 falling from 25% in 1971 to 19% by 2008, and predictions suggesting this will fall to 18% by 2031.<sup>2</sup>

The British household is also changing dramatically. The size of the average household has been steadily declining from 3.1 in 1961 to 2.4 today (2009 latest figures). In 1961, 38% of households were made up of couple families with dependent children, which now has gone down to 21%.<sup>3</sup> In the 2001 national census 10% of all families with dependent children were step-families.<sup>4</sup>

## Composition of UK households in 2009



- 29%: couple household with no children
- 28%: one person household
- 18%: couple household with one to two dependent children
- 7%: lone parents with dependent children
- 6%: couples with non-dependent children only
- 3%: household with three or more dependent children
- 3%: lone parents with non-dependent children only
- 3%: households of two or more unrelated adults
- 1%: multifamily households

Data taken from Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p15

Over the past few decades we have seen a rise in geographical mobility amongst younger people. Only 12% of graduates live in the same local authority as they were born, compared with 44% of the general population.<sup>5</sup>

## Marriage, divorce and births

Since 1992 the average age at first childbirth is lower than the average age of marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Marriage rates have seen a steady decline since the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> The latest figures for marriage (2007) show the lowest number recorded since records began, at 231,500.<sup>8</sup> However, at the same time the divorce rate has been at the lowest since 1976.<sup>9</sup>

The number of births is at a seven year high of 709,000 in 2008. The average age of women giving birth for the first time has increased from 23.8 years in 1971 to 27.5 years in 2008. This is also reflected in the number of babies being born to under 25s decreasing from 47% in 1971 to 25% in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

Nearly half of babies are now born outside of marriage, with an increase from 4.2% in 1951 to 45% today.<sup>11</sup>

## Household finances and expenditure

The average household net wealth has been cut by 15% in real terms in 2007 and 2008.<sup>12</sup> A recent report by Capital Economics predicted that the 2010 emergency budget will erode a further 8% off of household incomes by 2015, with the average family £3,000 worse off.<sup>13</sup>

## Work

Along with the effect on household income, the recession has had a big impact on work and employment, with people being made redundant, having their hours cut or changing to working part time. The employment rate currently stands at 70.5%, with unemployment at 7.8%, equating to 2.46 million people. The number of long term unemployed, i.e. those that have been unemployed for more than 6 months, is 1.16 million.<sup>14</sup>

One of the consequences of the recession has been changing work patterns, with a rise in part time work. The number of part time workers in the UK has now reached 7.82 million – the highest number recorded. This high number means that 27% of the workforce now works part time, compared with 18.2 million in full time employment.<sup>15</sup>

Eighty per cent of families have at least one parent working 16 hours or more hours per week, with 55% of lone parents working 16 or more hours per week and 57% of couple families having both partners doing so.<sup>16</sup>

Over the past half century female employment has been gradually rising. Today 31% of married or cohabiting mothers and 27% of lone mothers work full time while 41% of married or cohabiting mothers and 28% of lone mothers work part time. In 1951 one in six mothers worked, compared with four in six today.<sup>17</sup>

## Childcare trends

Over the past decade there has been a steady increase in childcare available, with the number of providers offering full day child care in England going up 77% since 2001.<sup>18</sup>

One of the biggest, and most encouraging, changes to families in the last few decades is the increase in time spend by fathers with their children. Between 1974 and 2000 the reported time increase was 200%, with fathers today far more engaged with childcare, family events and schooling.<sup>19</sup> For non residential fathers, 75% saw their children at least once a week and 56% had an order or agreement for child support in place.<sup>20</sup>

## Social views

People's social views have undergone a dramatic shift over the past few decades. Seventy per cent now think sex before marriage is rarely or not wrong compared with 47% in 1984. And 66% agreed with the statement there 'there is little different socially between being married and living together', while only 28% said that married couples make better parents than unmarried ones. Seventy two per cent of parents consider themselves less strict than their own parents.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, 78% of people agree that 'it is not divorce that harms children, but conflict between their parents' and 63% say that 'a same sex couple can be just as committed to each other as a man and a woman'.<sup>22</sup>

## Inequality

Income inequality in the UK is now at its highest level since comparable statistics began in 1961.<sup>23</sup> Eight per cent of people in the UK live in persistent poverty, a proportion higher than for many European countries including Germany, France and Portugal. There are 5.3 million people who experience multiple disadvantages. People living in the poorest neighbourhoods in England will, on average, die seven years earlier than people living in the richest neighbourhoods.<sup>24</sup>

## Families in crisis

While many families are thriving and successful, a minority of around 140,000 families across Britain experience complex and multiple problems.<sup>25</sup>

In 2009 60,900 children were in care in England. Of these children, 37,100 were placed into care because of 'abuse or neglect', 6,800 because of 'family dysfunction', and 5,400 because of 'absent parenting'.<sup>26</sup> The number of children on the 'at risk' register was 36,000 as of 2008.<sup>27</sup>

There were 150,000 households classed as homeless<sup>28</sup>, 150,000 children who had a parent in prison<sup>29</sup> and between 250,000 and 300,000 children with drug using parents.<sup>30</sup>

# Family Commission survey results

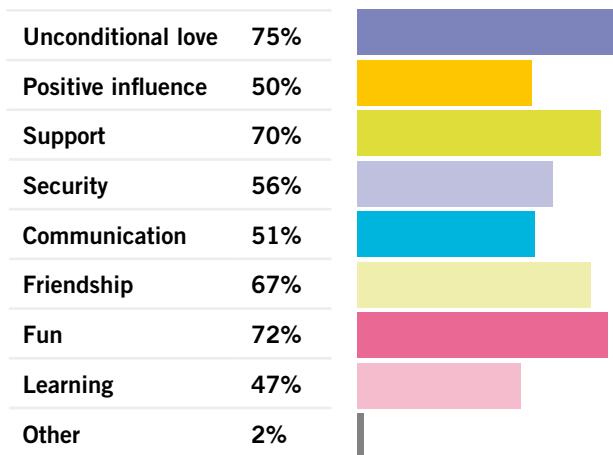
Over the 18 months April 2009 to September 2010, the Family Commission undertook a massive consultation of families in the UK. Through regional visits and seminars, focus groups, submissions, polling and the Family Commission survey – including a bespoke young people survey – the Commission heard from around 10,000 families across the UK.

This section sets out some of the most interesting results from the Family Commission surveys and YouGov polling. These results have helped identify the areas that families are prioritising and feel are important. What families have told us has shaped the final report and our recommendations. See the Appendix for further details.

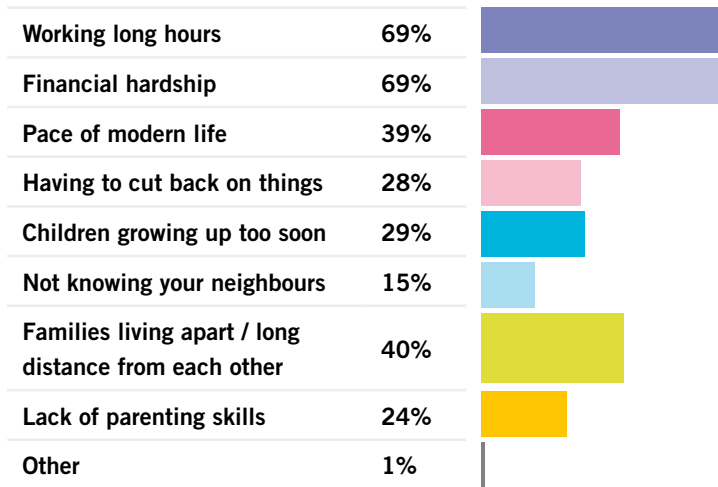
Where percentages add up to more than 100% this is because respondents were asked to select more than one option.

## From the Family Commission Survey 1

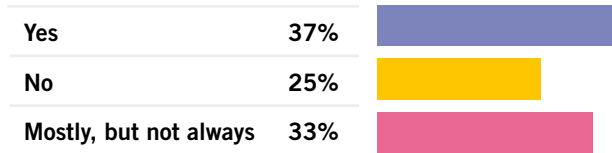
**What are your favourite things about your family?**



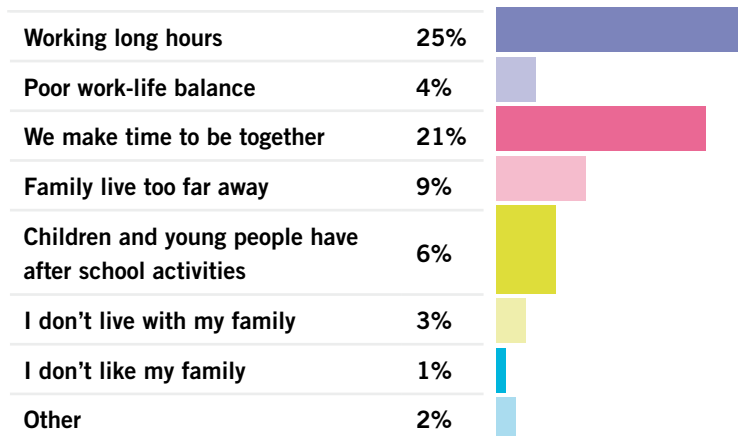
## What do you think puts the biggest strain on family relationships?



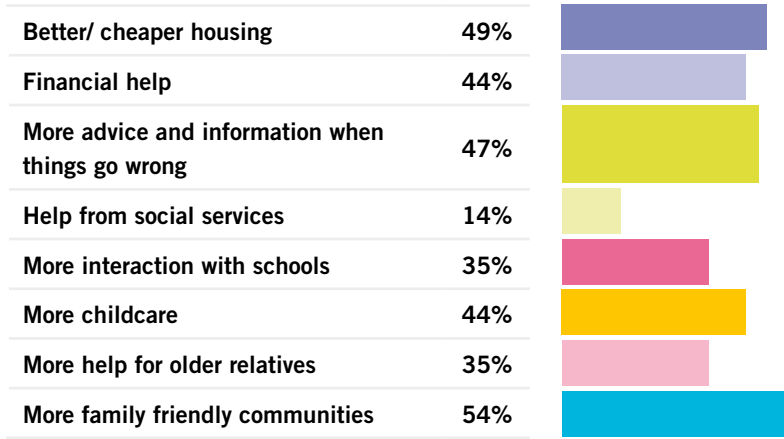
## Do you spend enough time with your family?



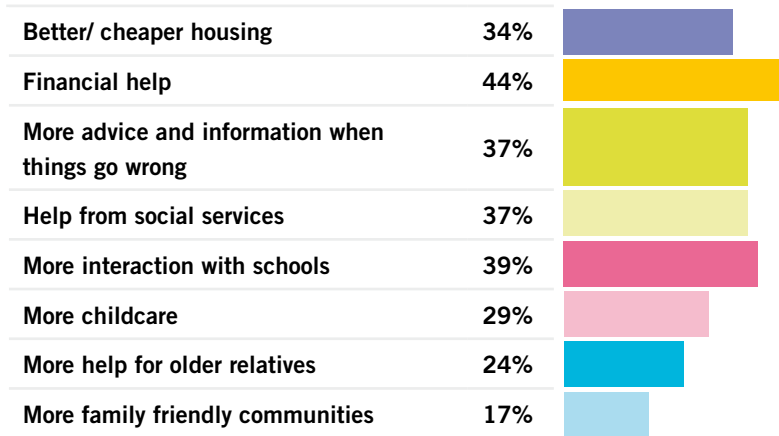
## What is your reason for that answer?



**Which of the following do you think families need?**



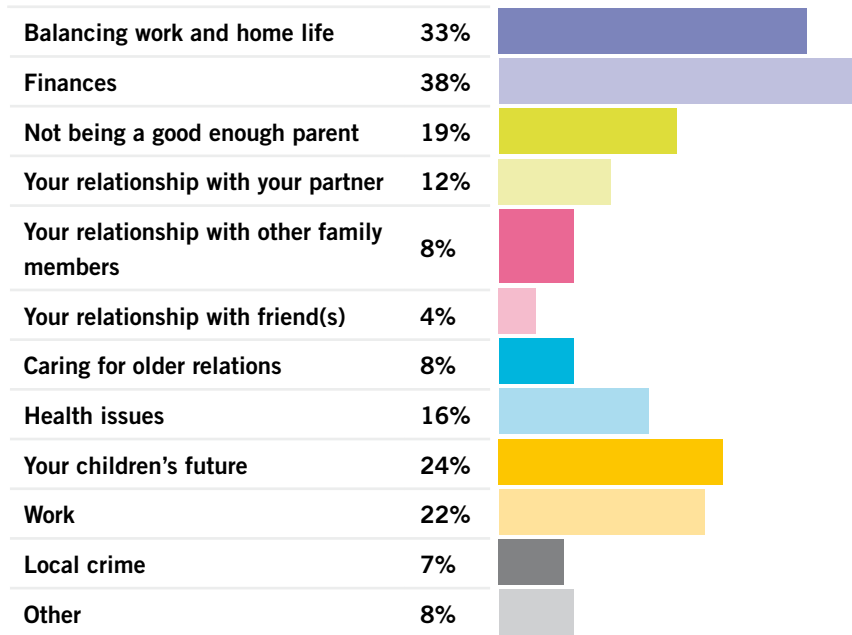
**Would you know where to go to get help if you needed it for any of the following?**



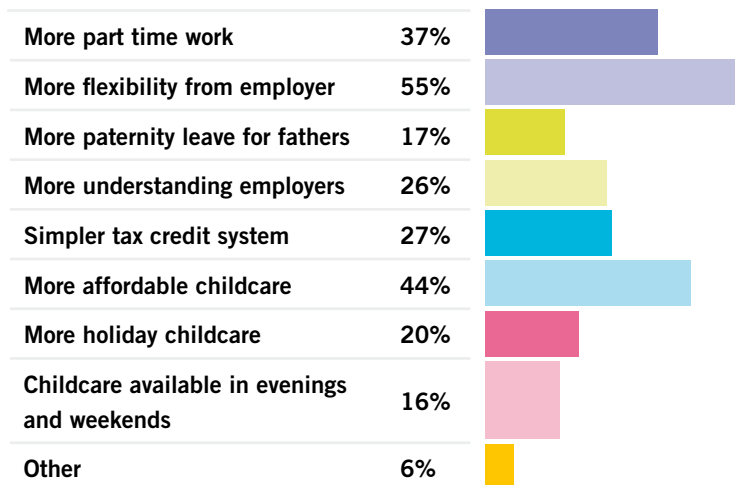


## From the Family Commission Survey 2

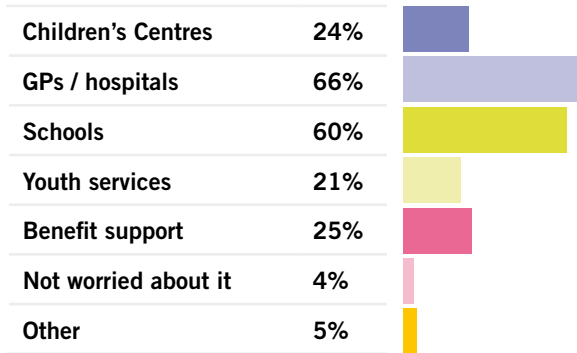
What main concerns keep you awake at night?



What do you think would help families balance work and home life?

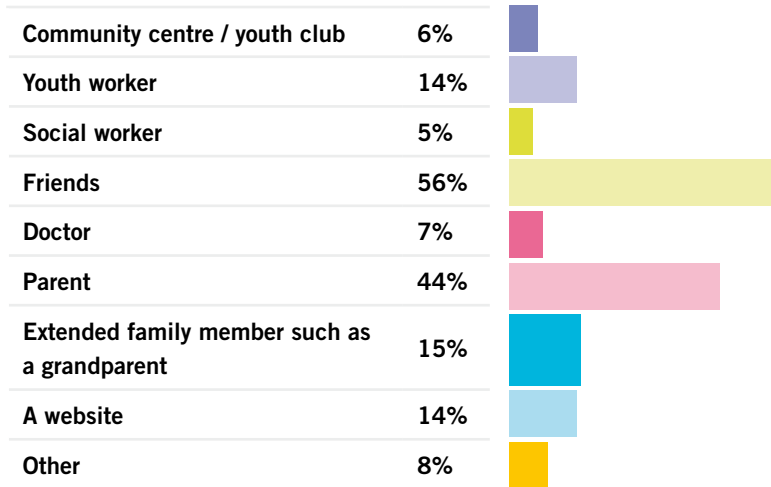


**Which public services are you worried about being cut?**

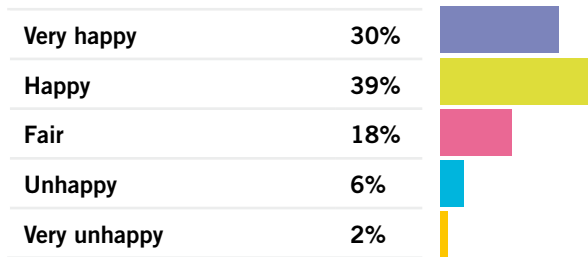


**From the Family Commission Young People Survey**

If you needed help or advice about something personal, which of the following might you go to?



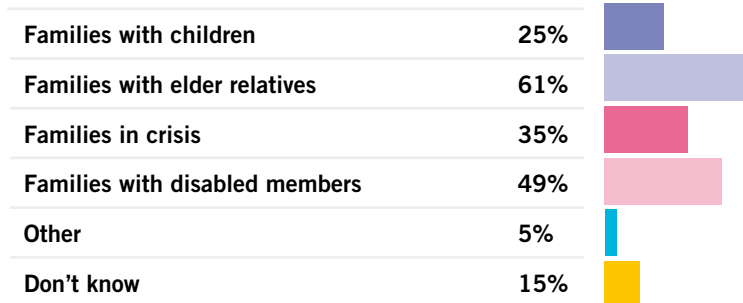
On a scale of 1 to 5 how happy do you feel about your family life at the moment?



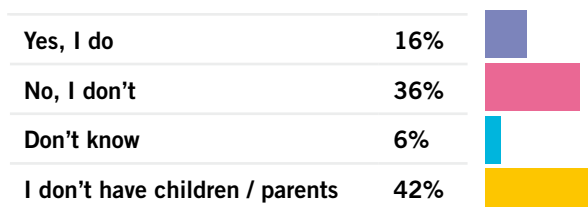
Two opinion polls were undertaken by YouGov on behalf of the Family Commission. These were polls of around 2,000 members of the general population aged 18+.

## From the YouGov Poll 1

Which, if any, of the following families do not get enough help from the Government?

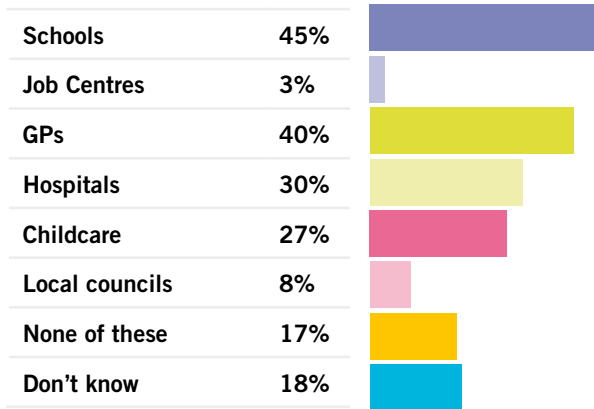


As you get older do you ever feel torn between caring for your parents and caring for your children?



## From the YouGov Poll 2

Which, if any, of the following public services do you think are family friendly in the way they work?



## Chapter 1 endnotes

1. Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p2
2. Ibid., pp2-3
3. Ibid., p14
4. Family Trends, Family and Parenting Institute, 2009, p36
5. Towards a Typology of Intergenerational Relationships: Continuities and Change in Families, Julia Brannen, 2002
6. Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p13
7. Family Trends, Family and Parenting Institute, 2009, p19
8. Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p13
9. bid.
10. Ibid., p23
11. Ibid., p24
12. Ibid., p59
13. Study by Capital Economics, July 2010
14. Labour Market Figures, Office for National Statistics, June 2010
15. Ibid.
16. Families with children in Britain, Department for Work and Pensions research report, 2010
17. Family Trends, Family & Parenting Institute, 2009, pp 46 and 59
18. Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p28
19. Family Trends, Family & Parenting Institute, 2009, p78
20. Ibid., p95
21. Ibid., pp28, 30, 50
22. Ibid., pp31-33
23. Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p69
24. State of the nation report, Department for Work and Pensions, June 2010, pp6-7
25. Reaching Out:Think Family, Cabinet Office, June 2007
26. Children Looked After in England (including adoption and care leavers), Year ending 31st March 2008, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008
27. Social Trends, Office for National Statistics, 2010, p122
28. Official homeless statistics, Crisis, [www.crisis.org.uk](http://www.crisis.org.uk), 2008
29. Every Child Matters, Department for Education and Skills, 2003
30. Hidden Harm, Advisory Council on the use of drugs, 2003



**2: Family united**

# Peter

Peter is 22 years old and living in central London. He has six brothers and sisters. Peter's mum struggled to cope and he worked nights to support the family. A year ago his mum hit crisis point and left the family home.

Despite Peter's entreaties, social workers for the younger children decided that he was not capable of caring for them. Three were placed into foster care and three were placed with their elderly grandparents in outer London.

Peter and his siblings hated the fact that their family had been broken up. The older children had to commute a long distance into the city every day from their grandparents' house to get to school and the younger children asked constantly why they were in care.

After eight months, Peter and his grandparents decided enough was enough. They set about trying to win the social workers around to the idea that Peter could raise the children. They had meeting after meeting, including a Family Group Conference, and in the end the social workers agreed that Peter could take responsibility for his three older siblings.

However, they had concerns about the state of the family home – so, unaided by the state, Peter and his grandfather ripped out the kitchen and replaced it with a new one and repainted the whole house. But he would not be satisfied until his family was reunited.

Peter's case came in front of a judge sitting in the family court. The social workers recommended that he be granted 'special guardianship' for his three older siblings but that the younger children should continue to be in the care of the local authority. Peter, with the support of his grandparents and an the action plan drawn up at the Family Group Conference, argued that he was a capable guardian for all the children. The judge agreed with Peter.

When asked by Family Commissioners why he fought such a long, hard battle to become the carer of six school aged children at the age of 22, Peter answered: "Sticking together is what keeps you warm". The Family Commission agrees.

**P**ick 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 that we are a society that no longer seems to value the stability and protection afforded by the family unit. The statistics in the previous chapter tell us that marriage rates are at a record low and divorce rates are high, and Family Commission YouGov polling tells us that 50% of people say they see their extended family twice or fewer times a year.<sup>1</sup>

But there is something that statistics do not reveal, that families up and down the country have told us everywhere we have been – that 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.

## The extended family today

It is true that the structure of families is changing, and so is their shape. Decreasing family size – as outlined in Chapter 1 – means fewer siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins, but increased longevity means more generations of the same families alive at one time. This means families are becoming long and thin – ‘beanpoles’<sup>2</sup> – making intergenerational relationships becoming increasingly relevant. Today families routinely encompass an 80 year old great grandparent, a 60 year old grandparent, a 35 year old parent and a 10 year old child. This would have been rare only a decade or so ago.

The aging population has also created a new phenomenon in families, the so-called ‘sandwich generation’. These are the ‘baby-boomers’ born since the Second World War who have both their children (in their twenties and thirties) and their parents (in their eighties and nineties) to consider. The Family Commission talked to families who feel a tremendous pressure juggling care for both the oldest and youngest generations in their family, as well as having full time jobs.

A Family Commission survey has revealed that 28% of people with both children and parents feel torn between caring for their parents and



caring for their children. As the ‘baby boomers’ become grandparents themselves, the trend continues to become a newly emerging ‘club sandwich’<sup>3</sup> generation with the potential for interdependency between four generations in a family – with the ones in the middle carrying the majority of caring responsibilities. The same survey found that there is widespread concern about the help available to families with elderly relatives. When asked which types of families did not get enough help from government, the top response (61%) was families with elderly relatives.

These are profound demographic changes creating an increasingly intergenerational society. In every aspect, the Family Commission has found that public policy is lagging behind. Few services are yet thinking extended family in their day to day practice, meaning that a whole strata of family life and potential enrichment and support is being ignored. This is particularly stark when considering the importance of the wider family network (or extended family) and the role they can and do play in providing vital support to children and parents when things go wrong.

Certainly the changes in our life patterns and choices have influenced our views about the extended family. The increasingly mobile population has had a big impact on the proximity of extended family members to one another. Research by the Family and Parenting Institute in 2007 found that only 5% of people have lived in their current neighbourhood all their lives.<sup>4</sup> The same survey also found that less than half of parents live within a 15–20 minute journey of ‘other relations’ (defined as not parents or siblings), with less than a third of those from London or the South West saying that they did. This feeds a perception that the extended family is no longer a primary factor in many people’s day to day lives and therefore not significant.

But the figures only tell half the story. For at least half of the population, the extended family – particularly grandparents – are a vital source of practical support for many, from childcare to financial help. There are estimated to be between 200,000 and 300,000 grandparents who are primary carers for their grandchildren, with others providing considerable ‘respite’ care for parents often in very difficult circumstances.

The facts about grandparents are worth highlighting:<sup>5</sup>

- 7 million grandparents are under age 65, with 1.5 million under 50
- 1 in 3 families rely on grandparents, who provide an estimated £3.9bn worth of childcare
- 6 out of 10 parents say that their mum or dad are important in supporting their family
- 200,000 to 300,000 grandparents are raising their grandchildren
- Grandparents are getting poorer; 26% of grandparents with grandchildren under 16 years old live in poverty

The Family Commission has met grandparents who have taken in their grandchildren in the middle of the night to prevent social workers taking the children into emergency foster care. The Commission has been struck by how passionate so many of these families are, with a real belief that this is the right thing for the children and something they want to do. However, many struggle with the practicalities and too often with scant support from the state. Many told us that this created real challenges and hampered their ability to be able to look after their family.

Whilst some ‘stranger’ foster carers are paid up to £500<sup>6</sup> a week, family and friends carers are often deemed by social workers to be part of ‘informal’ arrangements which do not lead automatically to the granting of financial and other forms of support. Currently only 7,000 of the more than 200,000 children looked after by family members are defined by their local authority as formally ‘looked after’.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst we recognise the challenges of placing children in effective kinship care, we do believe that more can be done support this crucial option for more families. This includes providing more practical support for kinship carers to take on the role.

The Kinship Care Alliance reports that 35% of kinship carers left or lost their job or took early retirement to raise children, leaving many of them in poverty.<sup>8</sup> In order to receive support, family members find themselves forced to seek a ‘residence’ or ‘special guardianship’ order, although

such orders still do not deliver parity with children placed in formal foster care arrangements.

The Family Commission met Liz in Merseyside. She was caring for her grandchildren as a result of her daughter's drug dependency. She received a phone call late at night from social services asking her to take them in, which she did. When she later asked for financial support from the local authority she was told that she should have let the children be taken into care first, then she would have had a stronger case for financial help. Liz was appalled at the suggestion. In the coming months Liz had to fight for basic items like bunk beds for her grandchildren to sleep in.

Christmas was a particularly difficult and expensive time. Liz was under a lot of pressure and was struggling to cope with caring for three children. She told the Commission that the only agency that really supported her was a local charity called KIND – Kids in Need and Distress. “The man who runs it rang me before Christmas, he took me into a room that was full of toys and told me to pick presents for my grandchildren. Then on the day before Christmas Eve he called me and said ‘What are you doing on Christmas day?’ I hadn’t even thought about it. He brought me round two hampers: one for Christmas Day and one for after. I don’t know what I would have done without them.”

Liz is not the only one. The differential treatment between kinship carers and non-related foster carers has been raised with the Family Commission on many occasions. In a recent ruling The Public Service Ombudsman for Wales ruled that grandparents who took in their grandchildren should have been paid a regular fostering allowance by Merthyr Tydfil Council<sup>9</sup> – a step in the right direction.

In contrast, in other cases some grandparents and other relatives have told us that they feel social workers are biased against placing children with them. Currently only 16% of children placed into care by local authorities are placed with family or friends.<sup>10</sup> The Children Act 1989 states that local authorities are under a duty to make arrangements for

looked after children to live with relatives or friends where it is consistent with their welfare.<sup>11</sup> This was reinforced by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 which says that family and friends care should be the first option for such children when they cannot live with their parents<sup>12</sup>, but the Family Commission has heard that the wider family network is not being fully utilised in many cases.

It is not just grandparents who are affected by these issues. Many children are in the care of siblings, as well as other members of the extended family. Unfortunately, no official statistics are collected so it is impossible to establish exact numbers – an information gap that the Kinship Care Alliance argues must be filled in order to better inform policy making and service delivery.<sup>13</sup> But cases like Peter's (highlighted at the start of this chapter) illustrate the point. After fighting to win 'special guardianship' of his six siblings, Peter then had to fight further battles to get the practical and financial help he needed to provide for them.

Many families whose children had been placed in care told us of their struggle to find out what was going on and the difficulties they faced in discussing and arguing for options and alternatives. The decision to remove children from their parents' care is not taken lightly but the stories that we have heard show a system which often places distance between children in care and their families. Families told us of the difficulties they faced in maintaining and rebuilding family relationships in these situations. This was in stark contrast to the practice we found in Scandinavia where the local authority took on the care of the child 'on behalf' of the family, with a formal contract with the family making clear that they maintained responsibility throughout. The evidence we saw suggested that children benefited from such a partnership approach.

Extended families are important beyond their role as carers. They are a great source of advice and emotional support, particularly during tough times. Thirty per cent of people surveyed for The Family Commission had turned to family for some sort of help or support as a result of the recession (e.g. borrowing money, childcare or providing somewhere to live). Furthermore, almost one in three said that they would be most likely to turn to a family member or extended family member if they had a serious problem.<sup>14</sup> This response is even stronger amongst young people,

with 58% of respondents to the Family Commission young people survey saying they would turn to family for help and advice. It has become increasingly clear that the extended family is a vital resource which policy makers and public services must recognise and utilise.

## Family Group Conferencing

One mechanism for harnessing the resource of the extended family that has particularly impressed our Family Commissioners is Family Group Conferencing (FGC). An FGC is a way of bringing family and close friends together to try to address problems and achieve the best outcomes for a child (and their family). It is a process, culminating in a meeting, which involves the whole family in setting out a plan for providing practical help and support to move forward.

The key to its success is that the family is involved in the decision making. This creates a more challenging but equal relationship with the professionals, drawing on the extended family and friends as a resource. FGC can be used in the early stages of a family struggling to cope but is most frequently used alongside the statutory child protection process or care proceedings. It has also been used where children have been bullied or with young people involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour. Unlike classic social work practice, at an FGC it is the family and friends who are in the driving seat, identifying issues and proposing solutions, supported by a professional facilitator.

Essentially FGC facilitates an inclusive style of decision making, whereby families and broader community family supporters are engaged by child welfare agencies in making decisions and developing action plans which help them nurture their children. The key success factor of FGC is its confronting, strengths based, honest, open dialogue approach. Families are presented with all the information that agencies have about their concerns. They then have to form a plan on how issues will be addressed and present this to the professional agencies. The plan is then discussed and action agreed.

FGCs get all the key players together. Family members are able to contribute to providing support. FGC runs parallel to the statutory child protection process, with plans being used as part of the decision making machinery.

Research shows that as well as preventing children going into care, FGCs positively engage families in decision making, putting real meaning behind the notions of empowerment and building capacity for change. Families talk of the benefits of being listened to and shaping the decision regardless of the outcome, as well as helping to develop a more positive dialogue with the statutory agencies. Families tell us this would help them most.

The Family Commission met some families who have been through the process of having an FGC who were great ambassadors and advocates for the approach. FGCs already have a successful history in some local authorities in England, including the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham who had their work on FGCs evaluated in 2005/6.<sup>15</sup> The evaluation report highlights the achievements of the project including calculating that 51 of the 119 children for whom conferences were held were prevented from entering the 'formal' care system – either remaining with their parent/s or living with kinship carers. The report also notes extremely high satisfaction levels with the process from children, parents, extended family members and the professionals working with them.

Whilst an FGC will not provide a solution for every family, and we have been told of cases where family members do not live up to the commitments they make at the meeting, the Family Commission believes it is an approach that should be much more readily available for families.

FGC is a statutory service in the Republic of Ireland, seen as a core part of helping support children and families. In Northern Ireland FGCs are a key strand of the crime prevention programme, helping to reshape the criminal justice system through a more preventative inclusive approach.<sup>16</sup>

# Family Group Conferencing in the London Borough of Camden

Family Commissioners also gathered anecdotal evidence of FGCs from families themselves in Camden. In this area, and neighbouring Enfield, members of the local Somali community refer to FGCs as ‘magic meetings’ because of the positive feedback from one particular case.

The case involved a family in which young children were being considered for adoption for child protection reasons. The FGC co-ordinator managed to locate extended family members on the paternal side of the family that were not known to the children’s maternal relatives. At the FGC it was agreed that the children could be fostered by paternal cousins. They now have the ongoing support of a wide family network – a network they might have lost touch with if they had been adopted or fostered outside the family.

## Families apart

As we have highlighted, the Family Commission’s research shows that around half of people see extended family members only twice a year or less frequently. For some the so-called ‘urban family’ of friends and neighbours are the practical alternative. Seventy per cent of parents told the Family and Parenting Institute that they have made friends with the parents of their children’s friends and 70% said their neighbours would help them in a crisis.<sup>17</sup>

These support networks are clearly important for many families and in many cases take the place of a family support network on a day to day basis. However, for others the absence of an extended family network because they live in another country or because they have been estranged as a result of family breakdown or being taken into care, can contribute to vulnerability.

The Family Commission has met mothers who are new to the UK who expressed real sadness, loss and isolation from being apart from their

own parents and other family members as they faced the challenge of bringing up children in a different country. One mother who is bringing up two young children in north London told the Commission about the isolation she felt with her family thousands of miles away in the Democratic Republic of Congo. “Family is powerful. Close friends are good but not the same.”

It is clear that there are some situations which put additional strain on extended family relationships. It is a sad fact that 1 million children lose touch with their grandparents as a result of separation or divorce.<sup>18</sup> A recent Grandparents Association survey found that before parental separation over half (55%) of grandparents said they were directly involved in their grandchild’s care but after parental separation four out of ten (42%) grandparents lost all face-to-face contact with their grandchildren.<sup>19</sup>

Children in the care system are another group who too often face the additional disadvantage of estrangement from extended family. For these children, who may have little or no ongoing contact with their parents, these relationships have the potential to fill part of the gap. Figures suggest that 76% of children in care are separated from at least one sibling.<sup>20</sup> Campaign and support group Siblings Together<sup>21</sup> highlights the detrimental effect this has on children. “As a child in care you come in limping and they cut the other leg off.”<sup>22</sup>

They point out that particularly when children in care are making difficult transitions such as to independent living, siblings can be a vital source of support, just as they are to children who have grown up in the biological family home. A brother and sister brought together at a Siblings Together camp went on to become flat mates – reducing their own living costs and providing important emotional support for each other.

Similarly, work by charity Centrepont shows that even where a teenager has become homeless because they are unable to remain living in the parental home, family remains important to them.<sup>23</sup> Thirty per cent of homeless young people told Centrepont that their family relationships were good. Centrepont argues that family mediation services should be more readily available when families begin to have problems, rather than



when a young person makes a homelessness application. In addition, services should recognise the emotional support that families can provide young people even when they are not living under one roof.

Services working with young people who are living separately from their parents for whatever reason should do more to:

- Consider the needs of all the children in the family holistically, not purely as individuals, and keep families involved.
- Keep siblings together. The majority of foster families cannot accommodate large sibling groups and we do not have alternative models of care which can – the Family Group Homes approach used in Denmark should be piloted to see if it offers a solution.
- Review whether financial incentives are currently working against the principle of keeping families together. Currently foster parents receive higher levels of financial support for caring for two unrelated children than for siblings.
- When determining the efficacy of a particular placement, social workers should place a higher priority on whether a placement allows siblings to remain together and close to valued extended family support.

One approach which has been of interest to the Commission is the practice of providing care placements for the whole family rather than just children.<sup>24</sup> This approach enables the family to be treated together as a unit to restore their ability to function as a family. The Family Commission was impressed by residential family programmes it visited in Denmark which provide intensive counselling and skills building for very vulnerable families over several months. This approach is also seen in the Dundee Families Project with significant success.<sup>25</sup> These are not quick and easy options but for some families do provide the opportunity and support they need to build a more positive future as a family.<sup>26</sup>

### **Prisoners' families**

Prisoners' families face significant and often severe financial, housing, emotional and health problems. Each year in England and Wales, 135,000 people are committed to prison – leaving behind children, partners, parents and other family members. Every year 150,000

children in England and Wales experience the imprisonment of a parent. For approximately 17,000 of these children the parent in prison is their mother.<sup>27</sup> The Department for Education and Skills<sup>28</sup> (now the Department of Education) estimated that 7% of children have a parent in prison at some point in their school career.

Following the imprisonment of a parent, children are often left feeling confused, guilty, scared and as if 'their world has fallen apart'.<sup>29</sup> Children suffer emotional and health problems including becoming withdrawn or secretive; displaying anger or defiance (especially against authority figures); attention-seeking or self-destructive behaviour; low self-esteem; and poor educational performance.<sup>30</sup>

Research has suggested that 65% of prisoners' sons go onto offend and as the prison population expands, so does the group of boys who may be adversely affected. Girls and young women face different but just as significant issues and are often more heavily sentenced than their male counterparts.

Children and families can play a significant role in supporting offenders. Statistics show that prisoners are 39% less likely to re-offend if good family relationships are maintained throughout their sentence.<sup>31</sup> Despite widespread acceptance this is the case, too many families still struggle to maintain positive family relationships. Prisoners are often housed far from home, making contact difficult. Visitors' centres in prisons are hugely variable; some have excellent facilities and support for family while others are just a waiting area. At the same time, prisoners are offered minimal access to meaningful personal development and relationship or parenting skills.

In her annual report 2008/9, Anne Owers (then Chief Inspector of Prisons) noted that despite improvements prisoners and their families were still struggling with basic issues<sup>32</sup> like:

- Inadequate access to telephones
- Difficulties with booking visits
- Late start of visits and daytime only visiting hours
- Threats to family days from budget cuts

- Long distances from home – this was particularly problematic for women and young prisoners, with many between 50 and 100 miles from home
- The rise in instances of female ex-offenders having their children adopted rather than returned to their care on completion of their sentence
- The potential reduction in services to support women coming out of prison

Organisations like Safe Ground ([www.safeground.org.uk](http://www.safeground.org.uk)) are not only helping families stay in touch and develop their relationships, but are also creating networks of support for families and men inside and outside of prison. Safe Ground runs courses with men in prison to strengthen their understanding of their roles as partners, fathers, sons and friends. It is having a positive impact on the lives of entire families and on the prison staff who are so vital to the effective use of custody for safer communities.

## Case study

### **The end of a relationship, not the end of a family**

The relationship between parent and child has always been recognised as one of great importance, but increasingly we understand the impact that the relationship between parents has on children and family outcomes.

Separation or divorce of your parents is most children's worst nightmare, causing massive concerns and insecurities and often significant practical upheaval – including having to move house and/or school. That said, research from One Plus One<sup>33</sup> shows that this trauma may not have a long lasting effect on a child's outcomes if it is well managed by parents who keep their personal conflict during this period and afterwards to a minimum. With a growing number of children born to co-habiting (rather than married) parents and a statistically higher

likelihood that these relationships will break down, supporting parents whose differences are irreconcilable to end their relationship – but maintain a positive relationship with their children – will be an important part of improving family life.

However, not all relationships that go through rocky patches are irretrievable. Evidence shows that high quality mediation and advice can prevent or delay relationship breakdown. Currently as little as £7 million a year is spent on relationship support, despite the costs of family breakdown being estimated at £24 billion a year.<sup>34</sup>

## The Family Commission concludes:

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- 1** Many families derive huge benefits – and great happiness – from the love and support of their wider family network.

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  - 2** Family structures and forms have changed but the extended family is a huge resource and should be recognised as such by professionals and services. In particular, we think that there needs to be a greater emphasis on the resource of the extended family to prevent and resolve crisis.

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  - 3** Where family members are providing either full time or considerable care for children, they need to know there is help and support available if they need it.

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  - 4** Intensive support for vulnerable families works – Family Intervention Projects enable families to rebuild their family unit and retain the care of their children.

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  - 5** Families need to stay involved. We need to ensure that vulnerable children and families are not further disadvantaged by unnecessary estrangement from family members who may be able to provide them with consistency and stability that might otherwise be lost – putting family at the heart of policy for children.
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**3: Families that work**

## Luthfa and Minhaj

Luthfa and Minhaj are in their 20s and live in South London. They have a 1 year old son. Since Luthfa returned to work after her maternity leave they have been 'shift parenting' in order to avoid the high costs of childcare.

Luthfa works from 9am to 4pm as an Administrator, whilst Minhaj works evenings as a waiter. He gets home from work about midnight each evening.

Luthfa told The Family Commission: "I didn't realise how hard it would be. By the time Minhaj gets home from work I am in bed. Then in the morning I am off to work again. Luckily my mum is also able to help out; we wouldn't be able to manage without the help and support of the family."

"It's great that our son gets to spend plenty of time with both his parents but it does mean that my husband and I get to spend very little time together as a couple. If only childcare was cheaper this would definitely take some of the strain off our family."

**I**t has been a tough couple of years for many British families. **Two-thirds of those who completed the Family Commission survey said financial hardship is the greatest strain on family life and 38% said that their finances keep them awake at night. Since the UK recession began in 2008 average households have seen their incomes fall, with predictions that they will be a further 8% lower by 2015.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment has risen dramatically to 2.5 million<sup>2</sup> and the number of full time jobs in the British economy has fallen by nearly 1 million.<sup>3</sup> Behind each one of these statistics are real families.**

Before the recession struck there were record levels of parental employment<sup>4</sup>, with significant rises in the employment rates of lone parents and mothers in couples in the preceding decade. Policies to make work pay and improve the availability of childcare had taken the country to the brink of statistical ‘full employment’. The debate about working families centred around the need to help working parents juggle work and family life – particularly in our British ‘long hours’ culture.

The period between 1997 and 2008 had seen a quiet revolution in workplace rights for parents. Maternity leave doubled and paid paternity leave became an entitlement for all dads. The right to request flexible working was made available first to parents with young children and then for those with children under 16 and plans to make the second half of maternity leave transferable to dads were announced.

The Women and Work Commission estimated that 10.5 million people have the right to request flexible working. However not everyone is aware of their rights, with a survey finding that 20% of parents were unaware and 66% expressed some concern about making a request to work flexibly to their current employer. Many people view flexible working as a great asset, with 51% of parents responding that the relationship with their children would improve if they could work flexibly.<sup>5</sup>

The use of flexible working has been very different for men and women, with far fewer men making requests to work flexibly, fewer having their requests granted and fewer who take their cases to tribunal being successful.<sup>6</sup>



The policy challenge for the future was seen as how to support working parents by, in particular, convincing more employers of the benefits of flexible and family friendly working practices. Also, to increase the level, esteem and pay rates of part time jobs and continue to drive up the quality and availability of childcare, both pre-school and out of school.

These priorities were reflected in the Family Commission's early findings. A quarter of parents who answered the first Family Commission survey told us that they did not spend enough time with their children; another quarter said that this was because of working long hours. This was especially true for dads who were 10% more likely than women to answer the question in this way.

The Commission also heard time and time again that the struggle to find appropriate and flexible childcare was a constant one. Families in particular highlighted that with many jobs now requiring evening and weekend working, traditional 9am to 5pm childcare provision was not meeting their needs. Statistics show that only 17% of working families with dependant children do their work exclusively in the conventional Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm hours.<sup>7</sup>

These remain unsolved challenges. However, the Family Commission believes this is not the whole story, particularly in our changed economic climate.

The recession of 2008-09 has had a number of impacts on the labour market which have in turn affected families; in some ways making different demands of policy makers. According to the CIPD<sup>8</sup>, analysing figures from the Office of National Statistics, total employment is down 580,000 (from spring 2008 to spring 2010). In addition, there has been a significant shift from full time to part time work, with full time roles falling by 910,000 and part time ones increasing by 330,000. The number of people reporting that they are working part time because they cannot find a full time job is now over 1 million. The CIPD reports that the net impact of this has been a fall of 3.5% in the number of weekly working hours in the UK.

The number of people working more than 45 hours a week has fallen to the lowest level since data collection began in 1992 – 19.1%. In contrast, the number of people working between 16 and 30 hours a week increased by 1.5% to 19.3%. Male employees account for the bulk of the fall, with 440,000 fewer men now working less than 45 hours per week. The number of women working more than 45 hours per week has remained stable.<sup>9</sup>

There is little firm quantitative data available on the impact these changes have had on other aspects of family life, but anecdotally the Family Commission has identified important trends. Parents have told us that the recession has changed the way their family juggles work and home. In some cases this is leading to changes in the balance of caring responsibilities, with families reporting taking on more second jobs, more ‘shift parenting’ and a rise in the number of ‘stay at home’ dads.

Two small scale surveys undertaken in the first half of 2010<sup>10</sup> have put the rise in the number of people taking second jobs as a result of the recession at around 10% – to approximately a third of workers.<sup>11</sup> These surveys reflect what families have told the Family Commission and are consistent with the rise in part time work, which is requiring some parents to take on two part time jobs in the absence of a full time role.

The Family Commission has also been told that as family income has been falling, the costs of formal childcare have become an even bigger challenge. Despite reductions in family income the cost of childcare has continued to rise, outstripping inflation. The Daycare Trust annual survey of childcare costs put the rise from 2009 to 2010 at 5.1% for England.<sup>12</sup>

Faced with such pressures, evidence suggests that parents are changing their working routines and caring arrangements. Parents have told the Family Commission that they increasingly have to rely on friends and family or on ‘shift parenting’<sup>13</sup> (see the case studies in this chapter) in order to avoid the high costs of formal care.

The 2009 Laing Buisson report provides some further evidence of this shift with figures showing a fall in the percentage of children under 5 years old attending day nurseries.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the falls are relatively small (with the number of 3-4 year olds ‘cushioned’ by the 15 hours

free childcare funded by the government) they contrast with annual increases every year since 2002.

The number of 'stay at home' dads has also been on the rise, though the scale of the change is hard to assess. The redundancy rate for men was twice that of women in 2009 (14% compared with 7%)<sup>15</sup> and families have told our Commission that for some families it has been easier for mums to find work or increase hours than it has been for dads – who have instead taken on more of the caring responsibilities.

Official figures (from ONS) for the number of working age adults who are economically inactive<sup>16</sup> put the number of men who give 'looking after family/home' as the reason for their economic inactivity at 210,000 in 2009 – up 16,000 on 2008, but other estimates including from the Fatherhood Institute put the real number at more like 600,000.<sup>17</sup> The rise, however large, contrasts with a year on year fall in the number of women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities – down 180,000 since 2002 and down 30,000 in 2008-09.

Probably the most significant impact on families as a result of these changes in the labour market has been the fall in many family's incomes and a dent in their sense of financial security. More than half of respondents to the first Family Commission survey said that job insecurity was a major factor in destabilising work–life balance. Around 50% reported that unemployment was 'the greatest' strain on families and 30% reported that part time and shift working were having a negative impact on their family life.

There is a widely shared view that work is the best route towards economic independence for families, and for many it is. However it is not the case that work is always a route out of poverty. Indeed, the number of children in working households living in poverty today is a record high of 2.1 million.<sup>18</sup> In addition, what the Family Commission knows from talking to families is that low paid, insecure work piles the pressure on family life.

The Coalition Government have acknowledged the role the current benefits system plays in trapping some families in poverty, in particular as a result of aggressive tapers on housing benefit when someone enters work.<sup>19</sup>

The Department for Work and Pensions has also recognised that the complexity of the current benefit system:

- a. Makes it hard to calculate the gain from work; and
- b. Creates concerns about gaps in payment between ‘out of work’ benefits finishing and ‘in work’ benefits beginning.

These are real barriers to work, and to sustaining work, for the poorest families. They are particularly high hurdles to overcome when the available employment opportunities are temporary or insecure. The Family Commission welcomes announcements that the benefits system will be fundamentally reformed.

There is not a single answer for helping families balance work and family life. For those working long hours with employers who fail to recognise the business benefits of being family friendly<sup>20</sup>, stronger rights to flexibility would be a real step forward. For low income families, ensuring that work pays and continuing to improve the availability and affordability of childcare will be as crucial to helping these families achieve the work–life balance and flexibility they want and need.

## Danny and Helen

Danny and Helen live in Leeds. They have ‘shift parented’ since Helen returned to work after the birth of their daughter Abigail. Danny worked during the day as a Civil Servant and Helen worked nights in the NHS.

However, in 2009 Danny chose to take voluntary redundancy from work and has been providing the bulk of the childcare for their two children. This has taken the strain off the family, who Danny describes as “pushed to the limit” when they were juggling childcare as well as two jobs.

Danny is now spending more time with the children. When he contemplates a future return to work he is planning to work locally, in a less demanding role than he previously held in order to maintain the improvements to the family’s home life.

## The Family Commission concludes:

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- 1** Happy families are families that feel in control of their finances and are not forced to put work ahead of caring.

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- 2** Patterns of work have changed dramatically for families over the last 40 years, with two income families are now the norm.

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- 3** However, a high proportion of families say they want to spend more time with their families and many children agree.

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- 4** For some families, a reduction in working hours as a result of the recession has meant more time for family. But for others, facing increasing financial pressures and increasing insecurity at work, money worries are a real cause of stress and worry.

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- 5** Working patterns are changing and the provision of appropriate and affordable childcare affects parents' ability to take the opportunities available.

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- 6** Some families with a history of worklessness need more help to get into work but significant change will only come when there is a clear financial gain for families when moving from benefits to work.

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- 7** Workplaces need to understand families' needs and be flexible and family friendly.

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- 8** Family friendly must not mean just 'mother friendly'. Flexible and family friendly working has to be more of a reality for dads and families at the lower end of the income spectrum.

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4: High hopes and aspirations



## David and Sarah

David, Sarah and their two children were having a hard time when they were first referred to the Sure Start Children's Centre in a neighbouring village by their health visitor. Sarah was suffering with severe mental ill-health and as a result the children were at risk of being taken into care because David was struggling to cope.

The centre manager was the first point of contact for the family, and she quickly made all of the team at the centre aware of the family's situation so that they were all able to offer support when needed. Soon after the referral, the relationship came to an end and Sarah moved in with her parents. David takes the children to visit once a fortnight.

Once David was comfortable at the centre, staff asked him if there was anything specific that he would like support with. Housing was a major issue and staff supported him by writing letters and making phone calls. Practical advice was also provided on behaviour, routines, boundaries and child development.

The family took part in Mini-mend and a cooking course. David has also done a paediatric life saving workshop. The family are regular attendees at weekly groups, particularly messy play and the small outreach group at which he has gained support from other parents. The children have been able to make relationships with staff and other children and have really begun to thrive in all areas of development.

The family have been allocated a property in the village where the Children's Centre is based, which David actually chose over another in a village that was once his first choice. He said that he feels part of the community and has built great links with other parents because he has been able to take part in so many activities at the centre.

David is now more aware of nutrition and healthy lifestyles and has given up smoking. The children have a varied, balanced diet, enjoy exercise and have grown in confidence. David's food preparation skills have improved, as has his confidence. He has offered emotional and practical support to other families and helps with events at the centre.

**T**here is no more important job than bringing up children, and families have told us that there is no more challenging job either. Time after time, families have told us how important it is for them to do their best for their children.

All families deserve the opportunity to make the most of the talents and abilities they have. The Family Commission has heard time and time again that the driving force for families is that their children should have opportunities to realise their full potential.

Parents have told us of their anxieties about their ability to get their child onto a successful path. Our Family Commission survey shows that 24% of parents say that ‘my children’s future’ keeps them awake at night. We also know that family circumstances are a significant determinant of life chances and that children stand a much better chance of succeeding in life if they have the experience of a positive and supportive family life.

Families have told us that it is unforeseen events that often compound to throw so many off track. The stress of losing a job, having difficulties with their housing or a family bereavement can be the change that pushes them from ‘getting by’ to a family crisis. Everything we have seen and heard leads us to believe that better preparing people for the role of being a parent, combined with backup and support as children grow up, would reduce stress, family breakdown and the need for costlier interventions in the future.

## Getting off to the best start

The pregnancy to age 3 years period is developmentally crucial for children. It is during this time that character traits such as empathy and resilience are developed as well as vital communication skills.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is during this period that a child’s foundations for life are built and those that get left behind rarely catch up. Parents, with the support of the wider family, are children’s primary educators in these crucial first years. What parents do at home with young children has the most impact on all aspects of their development – social, emotional, physical and intellectual.

Families have told the Family Commission of their aspirations to be good parents but some found it hard to meet their aspirations because of the pressures of trying to cope and the fear of being judged as failing. Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study found that "even mothers in the second from top social class group are more likely to report feeling incompetent as a parent or having a poor relationship with their children, compared with those at the very top."<sup>2</sup> Earlier and sustained support from pregnancy throughout early childhood can do much to help parents to be more confident, caring and nurturing as well as improve the quality of life for young children, with lasting benefits for the future to individuals and the whole of society.

Traditionally, the focus of support and advice during pregnancy has had a primarily medical focus around the physical health of mother and foetus. But this is clearly only part of the answer and a move to provide more rounded support and advice to 'parents to be' is underway in some areas. Locally, the Commission has found a growing number of partnerships between Children's Centres and local primary care professionals such as midwives and health visitors working with family support workers and others to provide more holistic ante-natal and post-natal experiences.

A growing number of Children's Centres now have health visitors and midwives based on site with 'parents to be' able to have their antenatal appointments at the Children's Centre rather than at the GP surgery or hospital, as was the case in the past. This means that prospective mums and dads have an introduction to the centre and the range of services on offer. It can also be a vital opportunity to talk with families early on about the kind of extra help available.

We have seen how midwives in some areas are working closely with vulnerable families to help establish positive routines and parenting when the baby is born. They are proving to be a valuable bridge for parents who are new to the UK and may not have the support of family and friends. Families told us how helpful this contact had been – helping them find out about and get access to support in an area and make contact with others in similar situations.

## Reaching out from Children's Centres

It is clear that the most effective Children's Centres are community based with a strong focus on outreach. Families, especially those that are isolated, have told us how off-putting a busy centre full of professionals can be. Some said that they wouldn't have the confidence to go through the door by themselves even though they knew there were good things going on. For some a more informal starting point is a better option – a chat and a cup of tea to make contact and make them feel at home. And sometimes it is as simple as having someone to go along with you.

The Home-Start workers that the Family Commission have met around the country often do just this – providing practical help, building confidence and accompanying parents to attend meetings, checkups and local activities and centres. For some parents this made all the difference, demonstrating a real potential for more local buddying schemes – especially those that are run by parents or grandparents for parents.

Children's Centres that offer the best help to those families who need it most become a springboard for people and local groups who can then reach out further and build relationships with local families. They also encourage and support local families to form their own groups that they can run – building important social capital. In an Essex centre we visited the Children's Centre was the host of over 40 different local organisations and groups, many of which were run by families in response to their particular circumstance or need.

Once engaged with Children's Centres, 'parents to be' can begin to build support networks with other parents that can help reduce isolation, loneliness and the risk of depression.<sup>3</sup> 'Mums and Bumps' groups, which bring together expectant and new mums to share experience and advice, are now widespread. Some centres include expectant mums in breastfeeding support groups. With evidence showing that when mums have peer support this increases the likelihood that they will stick with breastfeeding even if they hit problems, this is a welcome approach.

The early weeks and months after a child's birth are a huge change, particularly for first-time parents. Even those who think they are well prepared have told the Family Commission that 'life turned upside down', with the impact felt not just in the practicalities of life but also in the way they feel about themselves and in their relationship as a family. For many the support of friends and family is of central importance at this time and for an increasing number, Sure Start Children's Centres are too.

In a recent survey conducted by Netmums, 4Children and the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association (CPHVA), 67% of mums with children under 12 months old said they used Children's Centres.<sup>4</sup> However, there remain real challenges. Health visiting is meant to be the universal bedrock underpinning support for parents of young children, but further data from the Netmums survey found that 62% of mums said they either 'do not have a health visitor', or for those that do, they feel they 'would not be happy to call them'.

Seventy per cent of mums without a health visitor said they would go to their GP as a first port of call when they have a child-related problem such as breastfeeding, weaning, child development worry or minor child health problem. This compares with 25% of mums who do have a health visitor that they feel happy to call upon. The mums that do talk to a qualified health visitor are more likely to feel they have been helped than those who see a GP.<sup>5</sup>

Health visitors will only be able to have the time to develop strong relationships with parents if there are sufficient numbers of them and their working practices are re-shaped to meet modern demands. The Coalition Government has made commitments to increase the number of health visitors by over 4,000 but at the time of writing details on timing or implementation were not yet confirmed. The Family Commission believes that alongside an increase in numbers of health visitors, consideration should be given to the role that health visitors play and how they might be better integrated into a wider family support team which can facilitate a more holistic system of support for families and maximise the trust and 'reach' they have as universal professionals.

For parents and prospective parents with specific risk factors the Family Nurse Partnership can provide the additional support, information and empowerment to set them on the right track. The programme was designed in the United States (where it is called the Nurse Family Partnership) to improve the well-being, health and self-sufficiency of young first-time parents and their children. The intervention runs from early on in gestation (the aim is to begin before the 17<sup>th</sup> week) until the child is 2 years old. The engagement between the family nurse and the parent is frequent (approximately every two weeks) which is facilitated by low (compared with health visitors) caseloads of 25. Benefits in the evaluations in the USA found:

- Better maternal pre-natal health
- Fewer child injuries
- Longer intervals between subsequent births
- More father involvement
- More maternal employment
- Better school readiness<sup>6</sup>

They also estimated that the cost savings from the early intervention made by the family nurses was more than \$26,000 for an average cost of \$9,000.<sup>7</sup>

With pilots of Family Nurse Partnership only beginning in England in 2007, rigorous conclusions on the long-term benefits are not yet available but early evaluations show that parents are extremely positive about the support their family nurse provides them and there are early signs of reductions in smoking, increases in breastfeeding and positive levels of father involvement.<sup>8</sup>

## Helping families, not judging

All the evidence shows that early identification of need followed by early intervention has the most effective impact in increasing life chances. However, families have also warned about the difficulties of being labelled as vulnerable at such an early stage.

One young mother who had been assessed and was being offered support told us that she felt that she was doing a good job and was coping well with her situation getting over post natal depression and building her confidence as a parent. What others saw as ‘trigger’ points she saw as stereotypes. She was grateful of the support but fearful of a process which might begin to take on a life of its own and which ultimately she feared might end up with her children being taken away from her.

The Commission believes that there are real lessons here for those who are seeking to help families get on:

- The process of identification and assessment can feel very intrusive and like being judged – this has to be about working with families to decide together what might help best for them.
- The language of vulnerability and support can feel very distancing and stigmatising itself. Families who had taken part in a Common Assessment Framework often said it had gone over their heads in a flurry of forms and jargon. A mother was pleased to get a nursery place for her 2 year old but was not so happy that it was a ‘vulnerable 2 year old placement’. Professionals need to find new ways of communicating their support to families in a positive way.
- Advice and support from other parents is likely to be highly valued and less off-putting.

## Not an inoculation for life

The early years are vital, but we know that they are not an inoculation for life.

The link in England between achieving five good GCSEs and the educational attainment of your parents remains stubbornly strong,<sup>9</sup> as does the link between educational attainment and poverty.<sup>10</sup> In 2006, 79% of children from degree educated parents obtained at least five GCSEs at A\*–C grades compared with 33% of children whose parents left school without any O-levels or equivalent qualifications – a gap of 46%.<sup>11</sup> In 1986 and 1974 the equivalent achievement gap in O-levels was 44%. Similarly, only 35.5% of children who are eligible for free

school meals achieve five GCSEs at A\*–C compared with 62.9% of children who are ineligible.<sup>12</sup>

However, the evidence shows that the link between poverty and wasted talent is not deterministic. In other words, those brought up in disadvantaged families are not guaranteed to fail but the barriers they face are higher and more numerous than for children growing up in affluent or well-educated families. Our earlier analysis of the need to promote economic independence and reduce poverty is centrally linked to this agenda but it is not the whole picture. Research has shown that with the right support and opportunities children from any socio-economic background can succeed in education and beyond.

Analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England<sup>13</sup> found that young people are more likely to do well at GCSE, regardless of background, if the young person:

- Has a belief in his or her ability at school
- Has a sense of agency – believing that outcomes result primarily from his or her own actions
- Thinks it is likely she or he will get in to higher education
- Avoids risky behaviour such as truancy, cannabis use and anti-social behaviour
- Does not experience bullying

A growing body of research confirms the vital role parents play in the well-being, resilience and educational attainment of their children – if they have the know-how. A report published in 2010 by Goodman and Gregg<sup>14</sup>, for instance, says that young people are more likely to do well at GCSE if their parents:

- Think they are likely to go on to higher education
- Devote material resources towards education, including private tuition, computer and internet access
- Spend time sharing family meals and outings



- Quarrel with their children relatively infrequently

In order to address this deficit, Goodman and Gregg proposed major areas where policy might help to reduce educational inequalities:

- Improve the home learning environment in poorer families (e.g. supporting pre-school reading, access to computers in teen years)
- Help parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education
- Raise families' aspirations and desires for advanced education from primary school onwards

Work on the recent Knowsley Youth Commission undertaken by 4Children<sup>15</sup> showed that the majority of low income parents from deprived communities wanted their children to go on to further and higher education but felt ill-equipped to support them. One parent from Knowsley quoted in the research said: "All my life I have been called dumb. I'm dyslexic... A lot of parents I know can't read or write but we still want the best for our children." Building the capacity of parents, in particular parents who had a negative experience of education themselves, has been proven to contribute to a culture of aspiration and the ability to realise those aspirations.

Recognising this has been key to the approach taken by the Phoenix High School (see overleaf). Phoenix High School has brought parents into the school through the creation of a wide range of community activities from community allotments to family learning. The family learning programme has given parents the opportunities to improve their own skills and has also developed their commitment to and value of education to their children.

The Phoenix High School approach, whilst not unique, is not widespread and many parents (particularly of secondary school aged children) say they feel excluded from their children's learning. In a recent survey of parents carried out for a report by Professor Tanya Byron, 82% said they didn't know as much about their children's education as they would like, and 82% of parents wanted schools to keep them better informed on their child's progress.<sup>16</sup>

One of the recurring themes encountered by the Family Commission was the negative experiences expressed strongly by many parents and carers of their own time at school. Enabling more parents and family members to have the opportunity to take up training opportunities themselves is crucial in building confidence in the education system, creating a culture of aspiration and improving the economic outlook for struggling families.

## Phoenix High School

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%.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

The principles that have successfully underpinned the school’s improvement are:

- Recognising and understanding the context of the children’s lives and communities
- Children who lack stability at home need stability at school
- 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
- Some parents need help to support their children’s learning – including improving their own skills
- The best teachers are prepared to go the extra mile, every day, even when it is hard

## Families new to the UK

During the course of our investigations the Family Commission met a significant number of parents who were recent migrants to the UK and struggling with the transition to parenthood in another culture. We met a group of mums from China who were extremely isolated but had been put in touch with their local Children's Centre by a midwife who had identified the women as particularly vulnerable. The centre provided a Cantonese interpreter for a special 'stay and play' session and are considering other services that might be made available.

We also met parents, primarily of African origin, whose children had been placed on the child protection register often because of concerns about parenting. Language and cultural barriers loomed large, with many struggling with very little English. We heard regularly that access to English language courses were restricted by a lack of affordable or available childcare.<sup>19</sup>

Cultural differences were particularly apparent when it came to issues around parenting and chastisement. The Commission met parents from cultures where physical chastisement norms in particular are very different to those which are generally accepted in the UK. This had given rise, in some cases, to referrals to child protection teams.

What united many of the parents who were new to the UK was very little knowledge of the 'system' and what help was available to them. For those who were seeking asylum or had immigration issues, questions of entitlement to support added an extra dimension. Most were also struggling, particularly those claiming asylum, in extreme poverty with very poor housing.

What appeared to exacerbate this daunting list of disadvantages was the lack of extended family support available because their wider family network was in the country of origin. Many felt this keenly.

## Support for families as children grow up

Whilst access to a good school is a major priority for families, they also want their children to have good activities and opportunities outside the formal school day. This is important to enable children to learn new skills that enrich and extend their learning within school but also helps children make friends, develop their social skills and take part in new experiences that they may otherwise be unable to do.

Families valued a whole range of clubs and activities for children, sometimes around the school – from sports sessions to arts activities, after school club to holiday playschemes. For some parents, these were also an important route to get the kind of advice and support that those with younger children had available through their Children's Centre.

However, many families told us that their experience was different once their children grew older, with a real drop off of help and support.

Whatever the challenges of bringing up a family in the early years, few families are prepared for the 'onslaught' that the advent of the teenage years can bring. From friends and relationships to schooling and behaviour, this is the time that children branch out into independence, follow their peer groups and test out their own ideas – often pushing their parents' boundaries to the limit and often dabbling in risky behaviour.

For many families the transformation of their relatively contented 10 year old into an uncertain and in some cases troubled and aggressive 14 year old is a shock and many parents told us that they were struggling to cope with the changing demands of parenting older children. We know that the periods of transition – moving from primary to secondary school; 11 to 14 years; and the move from school to further education or employment – are times of increased risks for children and for some families we heard from it was at this point that things begin to spiral out of control.

Some lone mothers told us of the particular problems they experienced at this time – many said that they felt poorly set up to cope, with little advice or support to draw on. We heard about the difficulties of

combining both the roles of nurturer and disciplinarian in one, as a constant balancing act that was tested at every turn. Lone parents with children of different ages told us that they were aware that the time and energy spent focusing on ‘sorting out’ the difficulties that their teenage children were experiencing meant that their younger children missed out on attention and support.

Some parents reported that they had attended parenting classes for parents of teenagers and these were felt to be helpful. Learning to listen, empathise and set boundaries were all seen as crucial and led many parents to wish they had found help earlier. We are therefore convinced of the need to help families develop the necessary skills to provide positive support to their children at these crux times as well as on a day to day basis as their children grow up.

Parents, especially lone mothers, told the Commission of the particular challenges of bringing up boys without a male role model in their lives. In some cases parents felt unable to cope when crisis occurred. “They are bigger and stronger than me,” we were told, “so how can I make them go to school any more?” Others were aware of the gap in friendship, guidance and example that a father figure could bring. We have seen some very positive examples of mentoring schemes that offer this support and believe that more could be established.

Many lamented the lack of activities and positive challenges for their children in their school and community which they felt would really help broaden horizons, channel energies and build lasting interests. Despite myriad initiatives and programmes over recent years, the Commission repeatedly heard the view that there was still too little for young people to do – especially for boys. This is supported by national consultations with young people such as the Make Space Youth Review which found that 70% of young people felt that there weren’t enough places to go and things to do in their neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup>

We have highlighted the benefits that families have told us they find in Sure Start Children’s Centres and are keen to extend this kind of resource and support to those families with older children. We also recognise the immense resource of the wider community and are keen to engage people of all ages as mentors and buddies.

## Positive parenting throughout childhood

Growing recognition of the centrality of the parental role has led to an explosion in the provision of parenting support in the last decade. Parenting programmes are now being delivered in Children's Centres and some primary schools as part of wider 'parenting strategy'. This must be welcomed but there remains a taboo about asking for help with parenting or other issues. We have heard criticism that programmes are too focused on managing child behaviour rather than on a wider set of family and parenting issues including the need to empower parents and build their confidence. There is a lack of parenting support for families with teenagers and this needs to be addressed.

Parenting courses themselves can be seen as off-putting, with parents saying that they felt as though they were being judged to know nothing. Many told us that such courses need a different name that can be more positive.

That said, many of the parents the Family Commission met have found parenting courses beneficial, in particular when they have been delivered in a community based setting (somewhere they felt relaxed) and in a way that did not make them feel like they were being judged for asking or wanting help.

Parents also say that other parents are a great source of support and advice, with 58% of mums in a Netmums survey saying that they went to friends for help with problems as diverse as attachment, relationships and domestic violence.<sup>21</sup> From pregnancy onwards, "community-based social networks are very powerful as parents derive significant support from being able to talk over problems, share experiences and receive practical help."<sup>22</sup> There must be places in every community which draw parents together to allow them to build and sustain these vital links, particularly as children grow up.

## Families with disabled children

One particular group of families for whom the inaccessibility of services and support poses a major problem are families with disabled children or children with special educational needs.

Families with disabled children told the Family Commission how they have struggled to get access to education and support that meets their children's needs. Here we heard a consistent story of a lack of understanding. Families told us how difficult it was to get access to a school that could offer their children the support they need. Many families spoke of an impossible battle for recognition in a system which either could not or did not know how to respond.

It is also clear that the services and processes are just too disconnected and inflexible. For these families – already coping day by day with the complex needs of their child – endless, complicated forms assessing entitlement to benefits, support and services are an unnecessary additional burden. The fact that different services are provided through a number of agencies (Jobcentre Plus, local authorities, HM Revenue & Customs, the NHS) who do not share information or work well together, reduces the likelihood of families getting the tailored support they need. Support groups, often voluntary organisations, are an important resource for families to help 'decipher' the tangle of forms and processes they face and keep the child at the heart of the process, ensuring their views are heard and their rights valued.

Then when entitlement is established, too often families find that the help or support on offer is not what their child or family needs. For example, they may have been offered respite care, which in principle was something they wanted, but it was offered in weekend or week long slots and it meant their child going to stay away from home.

Finally, parents told the Commission that they lacked fundamental confidence in the system of assessment of support from local authorities because the assessment was undertaken by an employee of the local authority. Parents believe that authorities 'gate-keep' their resources and that decisions about support are not made solely on the basis of need, as they should be.

There is clearly a need for more accessible support and resources for families with disabled children in the community as well as a great understanding and recognition by professionals of the issues that these families face. Often by far the most informed expert about the needs of a disabled child may be the parent, but parents' views are not always taken seriously.

For many of these families the idea of a strong, independent advocate is popular. Families felt that the support of someone that they felt was 'on their side', providing practical and emotional support, would be invaluable.



## The human experience

We met Mary on a Family Commission visit to Weston-super-Mare. Mary has an 11 year old daughter with autism and hyperactivity. Her daughter was diagnosed when she was 3 and Mary says she has managed to build up a “fantastic care package”. However, this is because she says she is “very vocal” and has a good social worker. Other people are not so lucky. Mary and her daughter do have ups and downs when problems arise and further support is needed, but overall she is happy with the support she gets.

Mary is part of the Supportive Parents group. The group is a parent-led organisation providing information and support to parents in Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire whose children have any kind of special education need from pre-school to age 19.

The group is a service for parents who need a bit of extra support, information or just a friendly face. It offers telephone support, training and face to face meetings. Their aim is to work towards ensuring children with special educational needs have equal educational opportunities and to enable parents of children with special educational needs to support each other.

The group has been a great help to Mary when times have not been so good, and given her the confidence to ask for more – to ‘personalise the package’ – and not just put up with what she is given. This has been particularly helpful on respite care, which Mary says was very important in revitalising her and her daughter.

On the whole Mary says “we laugh more than we cry” and that things have improved for families like hers.

# The Family Commission concludes:

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- 1** The transition to parenthood is an important one for both parents and children. More support needs to be available, beyond the purely medical, which will contribute to greater happiness and family stability.

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- 2** Early years support has a positive impact on child development that can last a lifetime.

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- 3** Early identification and intervention is important but needs to be communicated to parents in a positive way that helps them plan for their future.

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- 4** Universal services such as Sure Start Children's Centres are playing an increasingly important role in providing advice, support and information for parents in a way that is not stigmatising. They are also a good way for parents to meet and support one another but they need to be accessible, to reach out to the community and work with other agencies.

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- 5** Families with older children still miss out and need support as their children grow up.

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- 6** Families with disabled children face particular challenges, and services and systems need to become more flexible and accessible in order to best support them.

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- 7** Parents want to be active in their children's education but this gets harder as they get older, especially for parents who had a negative educational experience.

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- 8** Parenting support makes a difference and parents also benefit from peer support.

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## Chapter 4 endnotes

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**5: When things go wrong**

# Rachel

Rachel came to London from the Democratic Republic of Congo in the early 2000s seeking asylum. In 2008 with a toddler and another baby on the way she was referred to social services by her midwife who was concerned for her children's welfare. She was living in a single room in a hostel and suffering incidents of domestic violence from her partner.

With her claim for asylum turned down, Rachel was in 'limbo', fearing she would be deported. Her immigration status meant she was not allowed to work. She was living in extreme poverty and could not afford to use a clothes drier, so their room always had washing drying everywhere.

Rachel welcomed the involvement of social services. She was aware that she was not coping. Indeed, she had previously sought help but her immigration status and her poor English meant that she was not able to access relevant services. When a social worker visited she told Rachel the room was dirty and she should not dry washing in the room. Rachel asked for support to make improvements but the social worker was not helpful. Rachel felt the social worker "gave orders" and "asked lots of questions" but failed to understand the challenge of living in impoverished circumstances. Rachel complained about the social worker's attitude and she was replaced.

Over the next two years Rachel had a further five social workers but despite this turnover her experience was very positive. Her social workers linked her with her local Children's Centre, including a full time, free nursery place for her daughter. They also helped Rachel be re-housed. They assisted her in applying for indefinite leave to remain the UK. They helped her develop strategies to cope with her violent partner until the relationship ended. Most importantly, they worked in partnership with Rachel, asking her what she wanted, treating her with respect, listening to her and then giving her professional and practical advice.

In 2010 Rachel's children were happy and healthy and had been removed from the child protection register, and her case had been closed. Rachel has been granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK. She feels more confident and aims to go to college once her youngest child starts nursery. Rachel says that if she ever felt she was struggling to cope again she would go back to her social worker, with whom she is still in touch.

**S**peaking to families across the country we were given a good insight into what needs to change in policy and services, in order to support families to do the best job they can for their children.

The families we met who were going through tough times had some of the most powerful messages about the challenges they faced, the services around them and the kind of solutions that would enable them to build a better future. Their stories echo research findings which demonstrate that experiencing multiple difficulties affects a parent's ability to parent effectively and requires positive intervention and support, focusing on family relationships and their interplay with community, culture, local neighbourhood and economic background.<sup>1</sup>

All families go through tough times such as bereavements, relationship breakdowns, redundancy and illness. When such events occur as isolated incidents long term consequences can normally be avoided, but persistent difficulties and challenges – sometimes over years or even generations – can become entrenched, grinding down resilience and a family's ability to 'bounce back'. For disadvantaged families, whose emotional and financial resources may already be stretched to the limit, a 'normal' life crisis can be a trigger to set them into a downward spiral that is very difficult to climb out of without support.

As one woman in Blackpool told us: "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". Another young mother, separated from her family in Scotland and struggling to manage her two young children after her husband left her, providing no support, told us that once the health visitor had put her into contact with the Children's Centre and she had a Common Assessment Framework done, she "felt humbled" by the support she received. "It changed my life, I can cope much better now and am much happier, my kids are doing well."

Despite both considerable investment in public services and a growing degree of political consensus about the need for more impactful interventions with vulnerable families<sup>2</sup>, there are many thousands of families with multiple and complex problems who are not getting the support they need. Failing to address such issues and invest in an

agreed early intervention framework results in high emotional and life costs to families and higher costs to the state in the longer term.

Many families we spoke with expressed their frustration at being passive recipients of services. They felt their views were rarely sought on what they believed would help them best. Families, even those with some of the greatest difficulties, spoke of wanting to be more active in shaping the interventions and solutions – they called for a different type of public service engagement.

The Family Commission met many vulnerable families who were struggling to bring up children whilst dealing with day to day problems. Others were new to the UK and battling alone to find their way through a system that they couldn't understand and that often did not understand them. Sometimes these compounded longer term issues of poor health, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic violence and mental health disorders. Intra-generational poverty with the attached low self esteem, confidence and aspiration were significant barriers for some of the families we talked to.

We met some inspirational workers from Dundee to Blackpool, Knowsley, Liverpool, Camden and Essex to Cardiff, who demonstrated to us, supported by the families we spoke to, that there are alternative approaches to be taken to better challenge and address the problems and consequences experienced by struggling families. The best practice we saw 'got behind families' – professionals working with families focusing on the causes of problems in their lives, identifying what their capacity for change was and agreeing with them what had to be addressed and how together they were going to put a plan in place to move things forward.

Despite the picture presented all too often in the media, there are 2% of families experiencing multiple problems – the minority of UK families.<sup>3</sup>

But, whatever the nature and scale of the challenges faced by the different families the Commission met during its work, there was a startling consistency in the story they have told. Families told us:

- They needed help early on but could not get it before their problem became a crisis

- They want practical support to change their lives or get on the right track
- They want to work with services and professionals that they feel are on their side and who they can trust without feeling like a failure
- They want a system that works with them to help them shape their own solutions – they don't want the system to take over
- They want to provide the best for their children but need help to get there

Despite often good intentions by professionals, this is not what many families said happened in practice. The Family Commission believes that a wholesale change is needed to get behind families in a coherent whole family approach to prevent and resolve crisis earlier.

A fresh approach is needed which seeks to work with families in a new way, focusing on relationships, with earlier intervention and easier access to sustained support. It is time to move away from the present 'deficit based' model – which focuses on families' problems – to a more 'strengths based' one, which works in a mature partnership with families to build positively on the assets they have.

## **Believing in families**

Whilst believing wholeheartedly that many families can be helped to stay together with the right support, the Family Commission acknowledges that there are some families that are so dysfunctional that they do not provide a safe environment for bringing up children and can be a cause of real fear and nuisance to those that live near them. Where children are at risk of harm, emotional or physical neglect, then swift action must be taken by professionals to remove them from the situation.

However, we would still contend that much more can be done to challenge these small number of families earlier and provide them with help and support to create a better environment in which to care for their children. Placing children in care is both a traumatic and expensive solution. Removing children from their families should remain a solution of last resort.



There has been a significant level of public debate about when it is right to take children into care in England and Wales in recent years. A series of high profile, tragic deaths of children have rightly led to demands to change a system that missed opportunities to save their lives. Children enter the care system for a variety of reasons. The majority of children enter care aged over 10 years and will already have experienced significant problems with lasting effects.

Vitaly important as these cases are, the Family Commission contends that our national discourse about the family has become too dominated by the tragic deaths of a small number of children. This is at the cost of improving a system which could not just help prevent unnecessary child deaths but also improve the quality of life of many 'just coping' families today, with long lasting improved outcomes for their children into the future. By having a predominately 'just child protection' focus we are leaving many children inadequately supported, thereby putting them at risk of harm, neglect, underachievement and low aspirations and maintaining social inequality.<sup>4</sup> This narrow short term approach in reality ends up compounding the difficulties experienced.

Equally important to getting decisions about care and intervention thresholds right, are measures to focus more resources on supporting the larger number of families that are 'just coping' or suffering periods of real stress and challenge, in order to prevent them reaching crisis point. This will help to support more happy and stable families in which children can be brought up. This must be the overriding objective of family policy.

By not taking a longer term view and shaping policy on the risk and protective factors for children, we are continuing to reap the intra-generational consequences of underachievement and failed aspirations with high individual and societal costs. Emotional stress, ill health and poor family relationships all contribute to poor child and family outcomes, influencing health, education, emotional and social development.<sup>5</sup>

## Intervening early and working with families

There can be little disputing the notion that early intervention to support families is the most effective approach. Yet the Commission has consistently heard from families across Britain who feel that they are not, or have not, been able to access the advice or support that they feel they need.

*“I know help is out there but I don’t know how to find it”*

Families from all walks of life have spoken of craving information, advice and support on a wide range of issues from parenting to financial matters and cultural and language issues. Our own research shows that only 37% of families say they know where to go for ‘more advice and information when things go wrong’ and 47% say they ‘want more advice and information when things go wrong’.

Families who are new to the UK are a group who particularly struggle with getting access to services. An unfamiliarity with the system of public services (including concerns about what has to be paid for) coupled with often poor English language skills mean that some families that are already isolated, and often living in poverty, are also not able to utilise the services available. For these families, navigating and understanding the system is an important first step on the road to settling into a new way of life.

For many families with very young children, Sure Start Children’s Centres are starting to be the answer to this problem, with parents highly valuing the ‘one-stop-shop’ nature of Children’s Centre support. They are full of praise for staff that support them in a variety of ways as well as being a source of invaluable information and signposting to other services.

For those whose children are approaching school age, families regret that there is not Children’s Centre type of support available as children get older.

## *“I asked for help but nobody took me seriously”*

Parents told the Commission that they had asked for help but that they did not meet the threshold for support; they were told they were being referred but nothing ever materialised; or that they were passed from ‘pillar to post’.

Contrary to the stereotype that parents that are struggling will seek to evade contact with professionals and services, we have learned from our conversations that many families have asked for help in the past but found that a lot of services have ‘gate keepers’ and require formal referral.

Our conversations support the idea that many families are hostile and/or fearful of having social workers involved with their family. A fear that social workers are primarily focused on taking children into care is widespread in many communities. In our survey only 14% of people prioritised ‘help from social services’ as the primary need of families.

But this does not mean that families are hostile to all help, support and advice. Indeed, parents told the Family Commission that there should be more services to which you can self-refer. When Rachel was interviewed by the Family Commission (see case study at the beginning of this chapter) said that she felt “great” when she heard that she had been referred to social services because “it meant that we would get help”. Rachel had previously tried and failed to raise the alarm that she was struggling to cope.

We heard time and time again how families were denied or declined support because they had not reached the threshold point. But we also heard from professionals that often threshold decisions were influenced by not just budgetary constraints, but also availability of support services to meet families’ needs. Too often, the ‘just coping’ families were missing out just at a time when if additional support was provided a crisis could have been prevented. There were also stories from both families and professionals of families who ‘coasted’ at a ‘just coping’ level, never quite reaching a crisis level. These families struggled to cope and as a result their children struggled to reach their developmental and educational potential, with long term negative costs for them and society.

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

“You have to become an expert in the system to get the help you need,” one parent with a disabled child told the Family Commission.

“We had 11 professionals working with the family at one point, I felt like I was drowning,” said a parent whose child had been on the child protection register in a London borough.

Consistent investigations into the family support network when things go wrong show a system that is overcomplicated and dominated by professional boundaries. The work of the Total Place pilots<sup>6</sup>, particularly the Croydon Total Place which focused on the outcomes for young children<sup>7</sup>, have laid bare the complexity and lack of integration experienced by the users of local public services. The more challenging an individual family’s circumstances, the more agencies get involved in their lives, causing a confusing mass of interactions. This can be deeply unsettling and frustrating for families and is extremely expensive for taxpayers.

Despite a major focus on the benefits of joint working, families still struggle to find their way through the system. For the last four years services have been encouraged to ‘Think Family’<sup>8</sup> to reduce silos and make services more joined up. There is some evidence that some parents are feeling the benefit of this. In places like Blackpool this includes adopting a ‘key worker’ approach where a single named individual interacts with a family on behalf of a number of agencies.

This has also been key to the Family Intervention Project (FIPs)<sup>9</sup> approach. The early evaluation of ninety families taking part in the FIPs has shown that staff reported ‘considerable improvements in all key areas of the FIPs work’, with the number of families involved in anti-social behaviour dropping from 92% at the start of the project to 35% at the end.<sup>10</sup> This is welcome but the Family Commission has found that these pockets of integration are just that – pockets. For most families interventions and support are diffuse, inconsistent and at worst pull in different directions.

## *“You get assessed and judged but they don’t actually help you”*

It has been a difficult time for child protection social workers, with the profession coming under unprecedented scrutiny. The Family Commission recognises the commitment and dedication that social workers show in extremely demanding and challenging circumstances. The Commission has no desire to add to the atmosphere of negativity.

However, the Family Commission has heard considerable criticism of the current focus and approach of social work from families during our 18 month inquiry which it is only right to reflect in this report. It also places unreasonable and unacceptable levels of responsibility on one group of workers. Social workers should be part of a multi-disciplinary team, working together to support, challenge and work with families to ensure that the best set of options and plans are put in place to ensure that children’s needs are met. Adopting a family focused ‘whole family’ approach is key – moving away from the present often too differentiated approach in which early intervention and child protection are too separated from each other.

The Commission recognises that the relationship between families and their social workers is a complex one. Where social workers are engaged with families in a ‘non-negotiable’ relationship this will influence the paradigm within which the relationship exists and families’ views of it. However, not all of the criticism of the way social workers work with families can be dismissed as ‘sour grapes’. Indeed, many social workers, former social workers and other children’s services professionals have acknowledged that the profession has changed in recent years and that it is less of a ‘family support’ service than it used to be. “We do a lot of talking and not enough listening,” one senior Local Government official told the Commission. “We have become social policemen,” said a former social worker. “We need to engage, rather than just assess,” reflected another social worker.

One of the most regular critiques from families is that social workers spend significant amounts of time making assessments but fail to provide practical support.<sup>11</sup> Families also find the ‘tone’ of the

relationship with social workers and other professionals unhelpful, saying that it is 'judgemental' and 'negative'.

Many families talked of social workers failing to identify why families were struggling to cope better and be able to provide their children with the level of care they needed. Families talked of the stresses of coping with children in poor living circumstances and of their need to understand their children better.

At the time of writing Professor Eileen Munroe is undertaking a review of social work<sup>12</sup> aimed at identifying barriers to improving practice, including a reduction in 'bureaucracy' which offers the possibility of giving social workers more time and freedom to engage with families. This will be important, but there are even bigger questions to ask about how we create a system that gives social workers the ability and capacity to work with families before they hit crisis point. Equal weight must be given to considering the role social work professionals can play in reducing and preventing family breakdown, child poverty and social dysfunction in addition to questions about how they work most effectively in imminent child protection situations.

Becky is deaf and uses British Sign Language to communicate. Social workers became involved in her family after accusations of abuse of her two children were made against a member of her family. Her children were placed on the child protection register.

The majority of practical help and support that Becky received during the two years her children were on the child protection register came from a voluntary sector family support project working in her area. When asked by Family Commission researchers to explain what she found was useful about the help she got from family support compared with the negative view she had expressed of her social workers, she made the following points:

- They were patient
- They didn't have negative attitudes
- They knew how to talk to me
- They didn't blame me
- They were caring and understanding
- They were more positive, they believed in me

### *“I want to be part of the solution”*

Many families told us of a system that does not work with them to build their own long term solution. Dislocated services and a piecemeal approach, alongside a high turnover of staff and short interventions, are some of the scenarios that families described which led to this situation of few families able to get the long term support they need.

As we have shown, families tell us that this problem goes deeper – they don't feel that services are working *with* them.

Family relationships strongly determine outcomes for children. What happens to a child early in life to a large part determines how they progress into the future. If a child does not receive emotional love and

care from their earliest days and does not form strong attachments with their main carers, the protective factors required to develop emotional resilience are not firmly established. Attachment theory is central to understanding how children grow and develop and of what skills parents need in order to form strong, secure attachments with their children.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence tells us that children need these strong, secure attachments. They need confident, authoritative parenting that provides a combination of ‘responsiveness’ and ‘demandingness’ – setting warm and consistent boundaries in a stable environment.<sup>14</sup> As we have discussed and as we witnessed throughout our discussions with families, parents’ ability to provide the security that their children need is affected by their own parenting experiences and the day to day stresses in their lives. Families told us that too often the professionals working with them did not seem to understand enough about the interacting influences that affected their ability to cope.

Public services have a role to play in helping to support parents in developing the skills to care for their children. Speaking with families throughout our research, understanding child development and having help with parenting throughout the early years was a key concern, as was help in the teenage years. Talking to professionals working with families, understanding the importance of attachment and how it could be supported was highlighted as an area for development – to strengthen professionals’ abilities to help support families in developing and managing their relationships more effectively.

## The way forward

Many of the innovative services we visited told us of their ‘strengths based’ preventative approach. While retaining an objective view, to protect the safety of the children involved, they work from the families’ positive starting points to build their skills and capacity to function more effectively, stay together and cope. Families’ stories back up the growing body of evidence which demonstrate overwhelmingly that this approach works best – for children, families, communities and the economy. But we are concerned that they are not being acted on any consistent basis.



In the wake of the publicity surrounding the death of Baby Peter, the number of children being taken into care rose by 40% from 2008 to 2010.<sup>15</sup> Coming at the same time as deep reductions in public spending announced in the Budget in July 2010<sup>16</sup>, the Family Commission is concerned that cuts to services for children and families for work other than imminent safeguarding concerns under s47 of the Children Act 1989 will be profound. This would dramatically reduce the proactive work that is being done in some areas to reduce vulnerability, support positive parenting and promote resilience, with the consequent benefits of protecting children better, keeping them safer and thereby reducing the possibility of harm.

Cuts to these services would be highly counter-productive and run counter to the growing body of evidence and recognition in support of early intervention and prevention.<sup>17</sup> The Family Commission strongly urges both the Coalition and Local Government to evaluate cuts to services not according to whether they realise short term savings but according to whether they will help support the goal of having more happy and stable families now and into the future.

If we are serious about breaking the cycles of disadvantage that some families are living with, the status quo will not do. We need to commit to a new approach in partnership with families.

Among the many good practice examples we came across in our visits around the country, we were impressed by the following three projects focusing on early intervention and the last two that work with families to resolve crisis.

## Families in Focus, Camden

Families in Focus provides community based services for children and young people from 4 to 16 years old and their families. The programme works on deprived estates in the London Borough of Camden, putting children and families at the heart of the community to improve community life for all. Parents receive individual help or can participate in group programmes, including structured parenting programmes as well as one to one intensive support. It takes a two-tier approach, combining broad-based universal services like family outings and dads groups with targeted support for those in crisis.

A large part of the family work is focused around improving and supporting parenting. One mother told the Family Commission: “Families in Focus has given me a space. They have given me the insight to understand that I can come through this.”

## Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) brings together families and friends in making decisions and developing action plans which help them nurture their children, thereby protecting them from abuse and neglect. Families are presented with all the information that agencies have on their concerns. The information is then discussed along with the consequences of it not being addressed. An action plan for how the concerns will be addressed is presented to the professional agencies. It is then discussed and action agreed.

What FGCs do is bring all the key players together. Families are given a greater sense of power and ownership and wider family members are able to contribute to providing support. FGC runs parallel to the statutory child protection process, with plans being used as part of the decision making machinery.

Research shows that as well as preventing children coming into care, what FGCs do very effectively is in positively engaging families in decision making, putting real meaning behind the notions of

empowerment and building capacity for change. Families talk of the benefits of being listened to and shaping the decision regardless of the outcome, as well as helping to develop a more positive dialogue with the statutory agencies. These messages echo strongly with what families told us would help them.

## **Option 2 Programme, Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan**

Option 2 is an intensive and flexible approach to working with families with complex needs – including substance misuse – where family breakdown is imminent. ‘Option 1’ is normally care proceedings.

Option 2 therapists work with families intensively in their own homes, generally for 4-6 weeks (for around 15 hours a week) providing the skills families need to move beyond the crisis. The programme uses Motivational Interviewing to help families to identify and build on the strengths in the family and beliefs about family life. The family define and set an achievable number of clear, realistic and personal goals. Therapists and families work towards those goals step by step, helping families to learn and establish new behaviour.

An evaluation of the service in 2008 undertaken by the University of Bedfordshire<sup>18</sup> found that it had significant impact to reduce the need for children to be taken into care. The Option 2 approach to families, including Motivational Interviewing, is now being rolled out as a core part of the new Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS) in Wales which will bring practical, empowering support that builds families’ strengths before they hit crisis point. Once rolled out, the IFSS is set to become the most systematic and widespread early intervention programme in the UK.

# Family Intervention Projects

The Commission visited many Family Intervention Projects and was convinced by both the whole family strengths based approach and the results. Family Intervention Projects provide intense support to enable families to function effectively and with a view to keeping families together where possible.

The Family Intervention Project model takes a fresh approach to helping families who have complex social needs. Key workers adopt an assertive and persistent style, focus on the whole family and co-ordinate any agencies already involved with families. Initially set up to tackle anti-social behaviour, Family Intervention Projects are now working with families to alleviate child poverty and prevent youth crime.

Evaluation of the programmes showed significant results. There was a 47% reduction in the number of families experiencing risks associated with poor family functioning, including poor parenting; marriage, relationship and family breakdown; domestic violence; or child protection issues. There was also a 47% reduction in the number of families involved in anti-social behaviour and crime.

# Dundee Family Project: Intense Family 'live in'

Intense 'live in' intervention is less available in this country as an option to prevent children going into care, but is demonstrating dramatic results in Dundee and is more widely available in Denmark.

Dundee's 'rehabilitation' year long programme for parents at risk of losing their council home and consequently of having their children put into care is showing 80% success rates. Funding is provided through the Local Authority Housing Support Service and Social Services. The programme aims to deal with the major issues around child safety, poor parenting, parental authority, social involvement, setting good boundaries and establishing good routines and behaviours, including having respect for community and neighbours. Families have to agree to participate, making an informed choice on what the consequences for them will be if they do or do not participate.

The family is moved into a residential accommodation where they live for a year and are given intensive support with the aim of changing their behaviour and turning their lives around. The starting point is "How can we help you change? How could things be done better? What practical support do you need?"

The focus is on giving families informed choices, knowing what the consequences are of each choice. Building a strong direct honest relationship, telling the family 'how it is' and challenging poor behaviour. Workers identify families' capacity for change, giving families options and choices and helping to apply the changes. It is a form of 'tough love', but what struck the Commission was the passionate commitment, honesty and tenacity of the staff on the project. The ability to establish honest relationships with families is key to sustainable successful outcomes.

There is a strong emphasis of improving parenting skills, which for most families includes very practical help to establish a daily routine of getting up and going to bed at an appropriate time, what is an appropriate diet, how to talk to and play with children, managing behaviour, shopping and budgeting.

## The Family Commission concludes:

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- 1** Families, even very vulnerable families, want to be seen as part of the solution not part of the problem.

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  - 2** The majority of families will work with professionals if they can build a relationship of trust and if professionals understand the context in which their lives are lived and the pressures they are under as a result. This includes a recognition and understanding of cultural differences and the impact of poverty and poor living space.

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  - 3** The tone of the dialogue between professionals and families is important. Families value a positive tone which appreciates and recognises strengths. This creates the trust and positivity to work on weaknesses. They want support and understand the need for challenge.

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  - 4** Families want practical parenting strategies for children throughout the age range. For parents with older children, help with understanding and communicating with their children is seen to be helpful.

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  - 5** Families new to the UK they need support in managing the cultural divide that develops between adults brought up in one culture and children growing up in Britain.

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  - 6** Families yearn for practical help with housing, money, immigration status, etc. – and when the promise of help is made it must be followed through and delivered. Professionals who don't follow through on their promises (or don't provide good reasons why it isn't possible to do so) lose the trust of families and parents.
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**6: A great place to live**



## Greenstart programme, Durham

Greenstart is a family project undertaken by the charity Groundwork. It promotes the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children, working with their parents.

The programme gets families in Durham who use local Sure Start Children's Centres and nurseries out and about in the great outdoors. Families develop a greater understanding and enjoyment of their local environment through a range of educational and physical activities including healthy walks, allotments, nature trails and gardening activities, as well as arts and crafts sessions using natural materials.

The Greenstart programme has had fantastic results – with 55% of parents and children becoming more physically active, 70% of parents and children using the outdoors more as a family, 90% of parents and children socialising more with other people and 58% of parents believing their children were fitter and healthier.

Through their work Groundwork are demonstrating that quality green space in the form of parks, allotments and managed open spaces (such as urban forests or nature reserves) are a vital part of creating communities that give families the best opportunity for a healthy lifestyle in all areas, but in particular in areas of deprivation. They are also showing that with a little support families can be supported to enjoy leading healthier lives.

**O**ur experience of growing up is intricately linked to the place we live; the people, the places, the aspirations and the culture. Whilst so called ‘birth assets’ – the family resource, income, aspiration and educational background of our family – are well recognised of being of primary importance to a child’s life chances, community and neighbourhood factors also play a crucial role.

Throughout the work of the Family Commission families have told us about the importance of having a good neighbourhood to live in – an area that is capable of meeting their needs, has good services and has good opportunities and places where their children can play. They also speak of the importance of public spaces where generations can come together as a positive focus of the community.

These concerns can become particularly acute as children grow up and seek independence, with worries often emerging over teenage peer groups, safety, behaviour and a lack of activities. It is clear that this is a concern that unites the generations, with both young and old recognising that a positive community is one where all ages are valued and supported.<sup>1</sup>

Just as most families want the best for their children, most families want a decent neighbourhood to live in. Many will identify with parents’ anxious look at local schools, GPs, parks, local amenities and green spaces before they plan a family move. However, it is important to recognise that for many, options and choices around all aspects of the place where they live will remain severely limited. When it comes to choices of neighbourhood income is too often determinate, with the high demand for these ‘family friendly’ areas reflected in increased house prices – squeezing too many families on ordinary incomes out.

More broadly, higher incomes can provide families with options and choices in response to their needs and concerns; from moving away from a worrying peer group, getting extra support to study or to find better work options. Only 35% of the poorest families think that they can do the best for their family in their neighbourhood compared with 73% of the richest.<sup>2</sup>

Families in some areas will experience multiple deprivation; an intense

concentration of disadvantage exists within neighbourhoods in some of Britain's major cities. Families living in 100 local authority wards experience the worst concentrations of poverty, with almost six out of ten children living in families relying on means-tested benefits. In 180 wards, more than half the children are in families receiving out-of-work, means-tested benefits.<sup>3</sup> Such high levels of disadvantage cast a long shadow over all aspects of family life. If we are to truly put families first, we must ensure that our communities and neighbourhoods reflect their needs – especially the disadvantaged communities where families have the most complex needs and the least control over how they deal with them.

## What do we feel about our communities?

The latest National Statistics from the Citizenship Survey produced by the Department for Communities and Local Government<sup>4</sup> show that most people are satisfied with the area that they live in:

- 83% of people were satisfied with their local area as a place to live.
- Older people were generally more likely to be satisfied with their local area than younger people. For example, 91% of those aged 75 years and over were satisfied with their local area compared with 77% of those aged 16 to 24.
- 85% of people thought their community was cohesive, agreeing that their local area was a place where people from different backgrounds got on well together.
- 76% of people felt they belonged strongly to their neighbourhood.
- 37% of people felt they could influence decisions in their local area.
- 40% of adults volunteered formally at least once in the 12 months, with 25% having volunteered formally at least once a month.
- 7% of people felt that racial or religious harassment was a very or fairly big problem in their local area.

Research shows that people's view of their area is likely to be affected by a number of factors. Those living in social housing, council estates and deprived areas are more likely to be worried about community

safety and less likely to be engaged in the community than those living in less deprived areas. Government statistics also suggest that levels of community cohesion are lower in deprived areas.

Despite this, the Family Commission found that the sense of community and belonging in some of the most deprived localities it visited is alive and kicking. In Liverpool's Toxteth, we met families and parents with extensive community support networks. Nearby, in Knowsley, young people described a strong sense of bonding and ownership with their community.

Some deprived communities are rich in such social capital – the networks, relationships, social bonds, social resources and civic norms that allow us all to function and flourish – while in others this is severely depleted. Research tells us that the richer in social capital a community becomes, the more likely families will flourish.<sup>5</sup> Research by the ESRC highlights how the well evidenced connection between poor health and deprived communities is weakened through community resilience.<sup>6</sup> These are areas with the 'glue' of strong networks and social connections that have often also benefited from positive community and regeneration interventions to overcome disadvantage and economic decline.

Such a strong sense of place is clearly important; imbuing its families with strong roots, a common understanding, pride and commitment. However, while there are benefits to a strong sense of belonging, we have also seen how on some occasions it can become so constraining that it becomes limiting – perpetuating the status quo and narrowing options. In some of these areas, expectations are low with a sense of doom and foreboding: "that's just how it is here". Getting out of the area becomes the main focus of both time and energy.

Evidence and experience shows how inward looking localities can drain aspiration and limit opportunity.<sup>7</sup> This can be reflected in the views of families and communities themselves and too often still in some of the professionals they come into contact with. However, families have told us how good services that provide practical help are helping transform their views of an area to build a new sense of positivity. Raising expectations and broadening horizons, whilst building resilience in these communities, will be key.

## What families want

A desire for good social networks, good services and safe environments in which to bring up children were at the heart of what families told the Family Commission was important in a good ‘family friendly’ neighbourhood. Whilst the majority of families still live within travelling distance of their extended family, only 5% have lived in the same area all their lives; the average time a family has lived in an area is seven and a half years.<sup>8</sup>

Places to meet, find support and make friends are also a key element of what families said was important to them. This is backed up by research from the Family and Parenting Institute<sup>9</sup> which highlights how families believe that children are one of the best ways of making friends and local support networks. Seventy per cent of parents say that they got to know people in their area through their children. Almost half of all children play with their neighbours’ children (45%), although a worrying third said that they had never done so. The attitude to neighbours in the same survey was generally positive, with 70% of people saying that they would help their neighbours out in a crisis. However once again this percentage differs markedly with income level; only 50% of families on low income (and most likely to be living on housing estates) think that neighbours would help them out in a crisis compared with 80% of those who are more affluent.

Many families have told the Family Commission of the difference local services such as Sure Start Children’s Centres make to their area. On a number of occasions, parents told us how the Children’s Centre had transformed their local area – providing activities and support as well as enabling trusted relationships with professionals and friendships with other parents and families.

As children grow up, services and support remain important, with access to schools being one of the highest profile areas of choice and contention. This is also the area where levels of income and the impact this has on choice are most defining. We have already highlighted some of the outstanding examples of community based schools we have seen in some of the most disadvantaged areas and are convinced that schools have a key role to play at the centre of the community – alongside other services – as a hub of activity and support.

## The mobility of service families

The UK has over 180,000 serving personnel in the Armed Forces.<sup>10</sup> Each one of these is a person with a family, and many have dependent children. Until recently the struggles and sacrifices made by the families of Service personnel went largely unnoticed and unappreciated. As a result of the high profile military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan thankfully this is beginning to change.

When you think of the challenges faced by Service families, two things would probably come to the average civilian mind. Firstly, for those with loved ones on active service, the constant fear that they will be killed or seriously injured is the most obvious and most unfathomable. Secondly, the mobility that inevitably comes with military service, both within the UK and overseas. But few of us understand the true knock-on effect that, in particular, mobility has on families.

In 2008 the Government published a Command Paper, *The Nation's Commitment*<sup>11</sup>, which recognised that Service families were often facing practical and tangible barriers to accessing the services that the rest of us take for granted. Therefore, rather than gaining the 'gold-plated' support many would argue military service entitled them to, they were in fact failing to access the basics. The Command Paper was widely welcomed but despite progress there are still real challenges being managed and grappled with every day.

The raised 'operational tempo' resulting from Iraq and Afghanistan has meant more regular deployments and therefore longer periods of separation for Service personnel from family. It has also meant greater mobility in general. For families, we have heard that each posting notice brings a tough decision about whether the family should uproot in order to stay together or whether stability for partner and children should come first. For those that decide to move together as a family there is a matter of weeks to find school places, register with GPs and other health services, and come to terms with starting afresh in a new place.

Disconnection from the extended family network is also keenly felt.

As we have stated, many families and communities have particular worries and concerns about both the welfare and behaviour of teenagers. Many families told us of their fears about their teenagers' peer groups, gangs, school and safety – recognising that this is a key stage of development and aware of the many pressures and temptations that teenagers face. Some families felt that they had little support as children got older with the majority of activities geared towards young children. For communities, worries about groups of teenagers 'hanging out' together was often linked to concerns about anti-social behaviour.

The answer for many families and communities is an increase in local activities for teenagers – an improvement which is often highlighted in local neighbourhood research and consultation. Where activities and interventions are introduced, they are popular with both young people and the local community. Evaluations of the Family Intervention Projects<sup>12</sup> show significant drops in anti-social behaviour as well as a strong recognition of improved safety by the local community – working with some of the most challenging families to help them tackle anti-social behaviour, youth crime, problems in school and truanting as well as wider family problems.

We have highlighted the benefits of developing coherent local services for families as their children grow up and have been impressed by the examples of extended Children's (and Family) Centres that we have seen. As well as making it easier for families to find and get access to services, these centres are also proving to have a powerful role in building the important social capital in an area – growing the networks, friendships and resources that families benefit and gain support from. In some cases these include more formal peer to peer support which we have already highlighted as being both effective and popular.

Developing a new capacity from within the community will be vital if families are to take a more active role in the design and delivery of local support and services; and it was this scale of change that families told us they wanted. The demand from families was for a major change in the way that local decisions are made, with an end to people in town halls making decisions over their local areas for them. We have highlighted the developments in some local areas as part of the Total Place programmes which are seeking to devolve decisions and budgets

to local areas. In these areas, local communities are beginning to have a say in the way that services are organised and will increasingly have the budget to back it up.

Changing the nature and relationship of services to become locally owned and shaped has the potential to regenerate communities, involve families, raise aspiration, improve effectiveness and, importantly in the current economic climate, be more cost effective. However, this bold move will need commitment at the highest level with a long term plan to succeed. Such a move would also fit well within the wider aims of the local authority to devolve more services locally. Ensuring that families are consulted in public design and review will be essential if we are to truly meet their needs.

In addition to local services, the quality of the local environment is crucially important. Good use of public space, safe parks and access to green spaces are all of key importance to families. But it is little surprise again that those on the lowest incomes have the least choice over their environment. Poor families are most likely to live in poor housing, whether it is a high density inner city estate or poorly maintained rented accommodation. Access to gardens and safe places to play is likely to be low – again increasing families’ dependency on public space.

In addition to a positive built environment, family friendly travel is also of real concern to families – especially in rural areas where services are dissipated. A quarter of people in rural areas say that improving transport is their top priority for improvements.<sup>13</sup> Ensuring safe routes that are closely linked to family services and activities is vital in both rural and urban areas.



## The Family Commission concludes:

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- 1** Families want their community to reflect their family's needs.

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- 2** The majority of people are satisfied with where they live and feel connected to their communities; however, families worry when their local area lacks vital services including positive activities for older children.

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- 3** The quality of the environment and of the relationships within communities has a big impact on families.

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- 4** Families want local places where they can come together to share experiences and support one another.

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- 5** Good services and support for children and families can help build the social capital within an area.

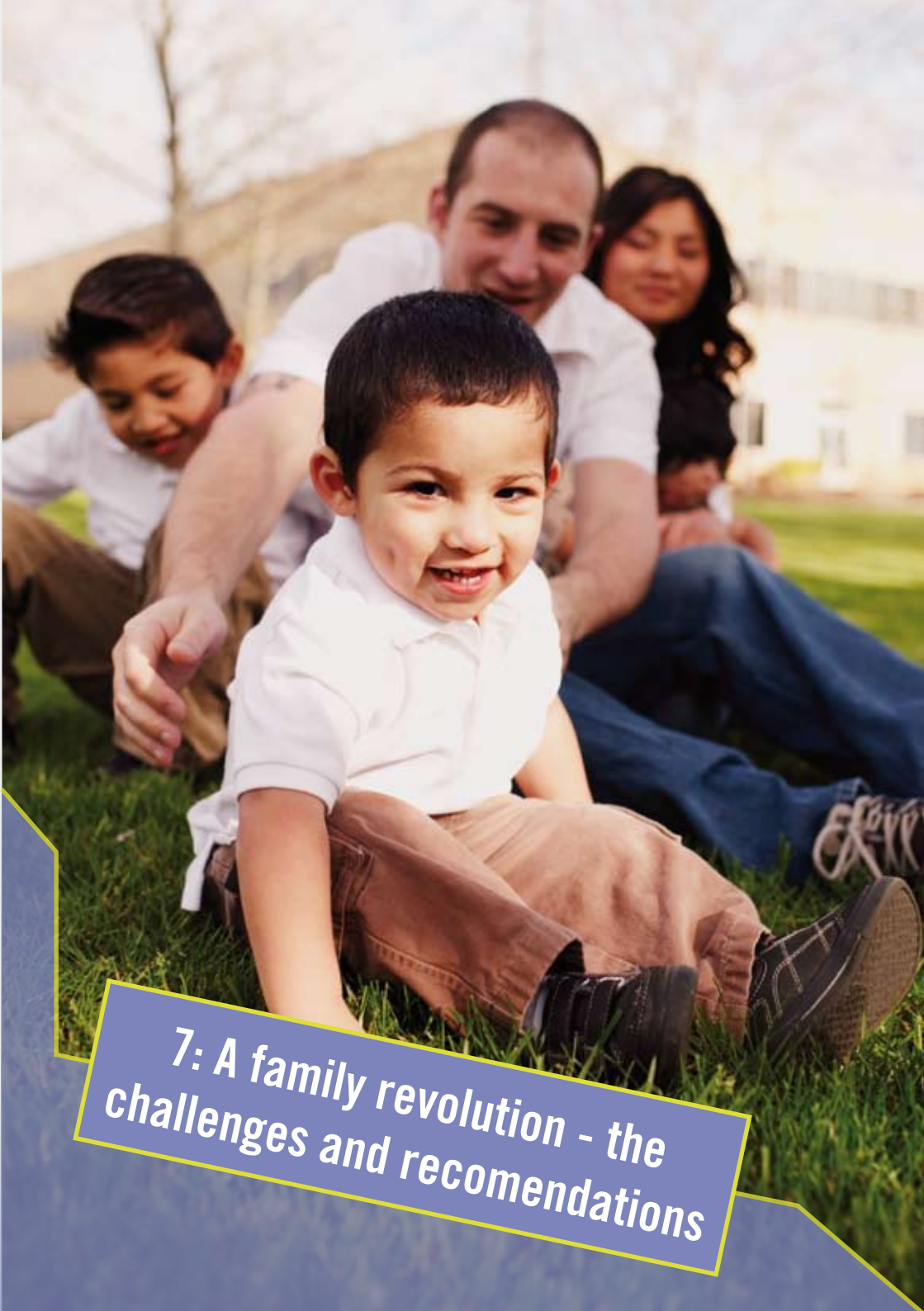
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- 6** Families want more control over their local neighbourhood.

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**7: A family revolution - the challenges and recommendations**

**Families are our most important asset, but too many feel undermined by the public services and institutions that fail to understand their lives and concerns. Too often families told us that they feel discounted or ignored by services and professionals who are unable to respond to their individual situation.**

From the planning department to the school reception, families told us that they struggle to have a say, battle with a system that ignores their views and have to live with the consequences. So they end up with services provided with the best intentions, but which are simply not fit for purpose.

Families are clear – they could achieve so much more if they were listened to, consulted and had people working *with* them. That way they could shape their own solutions and retain responsibility. This is especially true when crisis hits – when families often feel that experts take over, even though the family itself (including the extended family) may well be capable of drawing on immense reserves. Families told us that they want to be there for each other when times get tough – and we think that with the right help and support, many more could be.

We need to release the potential of families across the generations through a wholesale change in the way that services are run – liberating and empowering families to shape their lives and their futures. Families need commitment from the top to make this happen and help from the bottom to be in control of their lives.

We are therefore challenging all those that can make a difference for families to make it happen.

## Challenges

### A challenge to the Prime Minister's Family Task Group

Every single 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, whether it be to cut a service or provide a new one.

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. Only then will Britain become the family friendly country all the Political Parties said they want to see.

This would mean, for instance: families being consulted when housing and local services are developed; processes and bureaucracy being reviewed and simplified to make them accessible to families; extended family members being the first choice when parents cannot look after their children; siblings being kept together when in care; prisoners' families being helped to stay in touch; grandparents being recognised in all that we do.

We know this kind of challenge works. Lord Alf Morris, when he became the first Minister for Disabled People, required every government department to show how they had taken account of the needs of disabled people. This brought about a revolution in the way Britain offered access and opportunity. Let us now do the same for families.

## **A challenge to the legal system**

Countries with written constitutions, such as the Republic of Ireland, often include the requirement that all legal processes must take account of the needs and rights of families, with the underpinning principle that children are best cared for within their family and that the family and community need support in caring for them. In Britain, the legislative framework is clear that for example, extended family members should be fully considered as potential foster carers for children who cannot live with their parents. However, we have heard from families that all too often in England legal proceedings split families, pitching parents against each other, ignoring the extended family, isolating children from the support of the broader family and community. As Sir Nicholas Wall, the President of the Family Division has highlighted, positive shared parenting after separation is very challenging. Accessible and available mediation for all the family to ensure the best possible relationships are maintained would be an important step in the right direction.

And when children are at risk, too often children taken into care completely lose touch with family members who can be a positive

source of support. Other countries such as New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland make it a legal requirement that a Family Group Conference is called, so that the extended family is consulted offered the chance to support the child safely within the family. In Scandinavia families sign contracts stating that they will maintain their responsibility, and visit and support a child in care. In Denmark siblings are taken into care in family groups, whereas in Britain children in care are caused additional pain by being separated from their families.

So we challenge the system to put the 'family' back into family law. The concept of the family, whatever its structure, is one that most people agree forms a pivotal foundation for the individual and the state. Family law needs to reflect and respond to the diversity and richness of family life, providing a progressive and supportive legal framework that works to help keep families together and communicates with the best interests of children at its heart.

## **A challenge to social services**

We believe that if social services focus much of their work on prevention, early intervention and support, children and families have the best chance of staying together and avoiding the tragedies of neglect and abuse. We are aware that social workers have been 'blamed if they do and blamed if they don't' act to protect children. This has led to an extreme focus on assessment, process and crisis management which denies many social workers the opportunity to use their skills to support families and prevent crisis in the way we know they can.

We need social workers to continue their invaluable work protecting our most vulnerable children. However we also need social services to invest more time, more money and more creativity in the ways of working which offer early intervention, sometimes in residential settings, to prevent crisis and enable families to function and flourish. Social workers need to work more as part of integrated and multi-disciplinary teams. Protecting children is not a job that can effectively be done by one agency alone. The Commission has seen some of these types of projects in action, they have been evaluated and they work. Social workers can best carry out their statutory responsibilities by working with families in helping them overcome problems, offering parenting support

and helping families to help themselves. This requires confident, honest, challenging and high level communication skills.

So we are challenging social services to work **with** extended families to keep children safe and to support more happy and stable families.

## A challenge to local authorities

How family friendly is your town? Your community? Your playgrounds and youth centres? Your housing estates? Your local parks? Your new developments? A massive 92% of our survey said their local councils were **not** family friendly. At this time of 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, which 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 – not the other way round. In particular, by rising to the challenge of really 'getting behind' families with older children.

We challenge local authorities to extend Children's Centres work across the stages of family life, to make them accessible places for families across the generations.

## A challenge to employers

We recognise that for many employers these are difficult times. The recession has forced many companies – large and small – to cut back, drive for greater efficiency and re-double their efforts. 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. The rise in part time jobs will be welcome for some, but for many a full time salary is a financial imperative.

Parents have told the Commission that they worry they are not spending enough time with their children and, increasingly, their elderly relatives, and that the balance between work and home is a real juggling act. As

the economy returns to economic growth we have to create a new, more family friendly working culture rather than returning to the economy of the past.

We therefore 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.

## **A challenge 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. Professionals' confidence in challenging poor parenting, so as to ensure the most vulnerable children at risk are protected, is key. But training and development of professionals, not just social workers, needs to address how they communicate with families. They need to be able to communicate in a more honest, direct and enabling way, building trust and communication in order to develop the capacity and ownership within families to be the best parents they can be.

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.

## **A challenge to schools**

Schools play a central role in all our lives as we grow up. They are an important part of every community. But families have told us how they often feel distanced from their children's school and learning – especially as children go to secondary school. Families have told us how schools do not sufficiently understand the barriers they sometimes face in supporting their children's learning.

We know that 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. Outreach works. So our challenge to schools is actively



to involve parents (and grandparents – they too have stories to tell and skills to share), and ensure families are included in the whole school agenda. We also challenge schools to continue extending their work with other agencies, to help them provide the best support to children from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds.

## **A challenge to healthcare professionals**

Antenatal care brings midwives and other healthcare professionals into the family, which can and should establish relationships which could be of value throughout childhood. However, there is still a feeling that some health services are aloof and inaccessible and that patients have to jump through too many hoops to get to them.

There are particular needs arising when a member of a family is disabled. Many parents tell us they have to fight for their disabled children's rights. They tell us that even if they are offered, for instance, respite care, it is inappropriate for their family's needs. They say the plethora of incomprehensible forms that have to be completed creates a sometimes insuperable barrier.

With major health reforms on the horizon, 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.

## **A challenge to all of us**

If we are members of a family, all too often the pressures of time, distance and the demands of a working life can mean we neglect those relationships. Our survey showed that half of us see our extended family two times a year or less. Almost one third of us live alone. And yet every survey into 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 this seriously. 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 that previous generations enjoyed. An aging population need not be regarded simply as a

problem – they can provide respite care, baby sitting, friendship to an overstretched parent or to a lonely child and many other benefits. But we also have to provide more understanding and support to families caring for dependent and vulnerable elderly relatives.

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

It's tempting to dismiss the fact that families feel so often ignored, left out and undermined by decision-makers as unavoidable, because "we haven't got time" or "the problem is too urgent". But the truth is that to ignore this great resource is to waste crucial time and create crises so that problems to become overwhelming. Involving families in shaping their own destiny can save time and money and make us all much happier. The challenge is to take this opportunity now, and make the revolution happen.

## Recommendations

### 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 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 prisoners are separated from their families. We want to see positive programmes to keep families involved and together.

## **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 the age of 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 dependant relative, offering support for the new sandwich generation for the first time. This would be 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**

The Coalition Government has ambitious plans to move a million people from benefits into work. Families have told us that they want the economic independence that work can bring but for many the barriers are high. Families must be better off. They need support to get there.

Making work pay means providing more support from benefits to those in low paid work and simplifying the system. Proposals from the Coalition Government to introduce this approach get the Family Commission 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 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.

Maximising the benefits of and potential for peer to peer support and the building of social capital within communities, these Centres would mean that teenagers and older people – the sectors of the community too often regarded as 'problems' – could become real assets. Grandparents can become mentors. Teenagers can be peer to peer advisors. Parents can involve themselves in outreach as local advocates and champions for families. The Children and Family Centres would become a positive focus, bringing together the community across the generations.

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

This means support to build parenting skills for all parents of tots to teens. There has been a real growth in parenting classes for parents of young children and we recommend that these continue. Parents told us that parenting classes help them listen, empathise and set positive boundaries for their children.

We want antenatal preparation to take on the broader remit of offering advice and support on all aspects of the transition to parenthood, not just with a birth focus. Delivered in, or in partnership with, Children and Family Centres, antenatal care 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.

Recognising that some prospective parents will need more support, Family Nurse Partnerships should be made available in every area. We also want to see 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.

## **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 Commission believes strongly that Family Intervention Projects should be extended to be made available to all families whose children are at risk of being taken into care. For the most troubled families this may involve intensive family care – working with families in supervised accommodation to rebuild the family unit.

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

We know 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.

## **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.

# Appendix

## The Family Commission surveys

### Survey methodology

The Family Commission survey results are made up of:

- Two YouGov polls, undertaken at the start of the Commission in March 2009 and again in February 2010
- The first Family Commission survey which ran from May 2009 to April 2010
- An updated second Family Commission survey which ran from May 2010 to September 2010
- A Family Commission young people's survey which ran from April 2010 to September 2010

The first YouGov poll was made up of a sample size of 2,114 adults and the second poll consisted of a sample of 2,024. The statistics were weighted to be representative of all Great Britain adults. Polling was carried out online, as part of the 185,000+ YouGov 'panel'.

The Family Commission surveys were undertaken in shopping centres, at family events and trade fairs, as well as sending copies to doctors' surgeries and Children's Centres. Surveys could also be completed online through the Family Commission website at [www.thefamilycommission.org.uk](http://www.thefamilycommission.org.uk).

During the second Family Commission survey the Commission also partnered with Home-Start, which encouraged its volunteers and families to participate.

The Family Commission young people's survey was also available both in paper form and online. The survey was promoted through Facebook and paper copies were sent to several schools.

2,781 people completed the first survey, with 1,429 in paper format and 1352 online. There were 1,632 responses to the second survey, 557 in paper format, 561 online and 514 as the Home-Start version. The young people's survey had 596 respondents, 452 filling it in by paper format and 144 online. In total the Family Commission survey had 5,009 survey respondents.

## Survey demographic

### Geographic

The Commission ensured a good regional spread of families, with visits being undertaken in Cardiff, Edinburgh, Weston-Super-Mare, Blackpool, Liverpool and Camden. Survey events were also held in places including Stoke-on-Trent, Leeds, Norwich, Essex, Birmingham, Enfield, Newcastle, Bromley and Kent. Feedback was gained across the country through the online survey.

### Ethnic

The adult surveys had a fairly accurate spread of ethnicity. Eighty three per cent of the first survey and 84% of the second survey respondents were white, and 15% were ethnic minorities.

However, respondents to the young people's survey were less reflective of the ethnic mix of the country. A total of 55% of respondents were white, 18% were black and 25% were from another ethnic group.

### Gender

We have found throughout our surveying of families that women were far more likely to respond to the survey than men. The first survey had a gender mix of 60% female and 19% male, with the second survey increasing to 85% female and 13% male. The young people's survey was slightly more balanced with 64% female and 34% male.

### Age

The two main Family Commission surveys were completed by people aged 16 and over. The young people survey was for 14–19 year olds. For the first survey the largest group, at 30%, was 35–44 years old; of the other groups, age 55+ accounted for 12%, with 13% for age 24 and under. The second survey had a good age mix – 31% were aged between 25 and 34 and 30% between 35 and 44. For the young



people's survey 34% of respondents were 15, with the rest being fairly evenly distributed across the 14–19 age range.

Through the combination of the adult and young people surveys the Commission has been able to gain a sound reflection of opinion across the whole age range.

### **Types of families**

In the first Family Commission survey 44% of families were married couples, 8% cohabiting couples, 7.1% lone mothers, 0.7% lone fathers and 5% were single. This compares to the second survey which was completed by 55% married couples, 12% cohabiting couples, 13% lone mothers, 1% lone fathers and 5% single. An additional 9% were either married or cohabiting couples with no children living at home.

For the young people survey 55% of the young people asked lived in a married couple family, with 12% living in a non married couple household. Twenty per cent lived in a single mother family, with 2% in a single father family.

### **Employment/ family income**

There was a good spread amongst respondents based on household income, with roughly 6–10% of families in the second survey being in each income bracket, of incomes going up in £10,000s to £50,000 plus.

From the young people survey, 61% of the head of households were in paid employment, 16% were looking after the family home, 14% were self employed and 7% were unemployed.



[www.4Children.org.uk](http://www.4Children.org.uk)