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Dear Baroness Tyler,

Please find below 4Children's response to the Family Friendly Public Services section of the "A Balanced Working Life", Consultation Paper 108.

4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children's services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Sure Start Children's Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain.

We develop, influence and shape national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families. As the Government's strategic partner for early years and childcare we have a crucial role in co-producing policy with the Department for Education and representing the sector's views and experiences. We worked very closely with Sarah Teather MP during her role as Minister for Children and Families, and are continuing this close working relationship with the Deputy Prime Minister and his advisors and David Laws MP in his current role. Our national campaigns, like Give Me Strength, change policy and practice and help put the needs of children and families on the political and policy agenda.

How can we improve accessibility to public services for those who need to work shifts or anti-social hours?

With 3.5m people in the UK now working in shift patterns¹ and millions more only able to access their GPs, dentists, housing support officers etc. once they have finished work, it is clear that steps need to be taken to make access to public services more family friendly.

In our Family Commission report, we recommended that all public services adopt a 'Family Test' in order to ensure that they recognise and empower families via the services they offer. If families are left unable to access the public services they need, then those services would clearly fail this test.

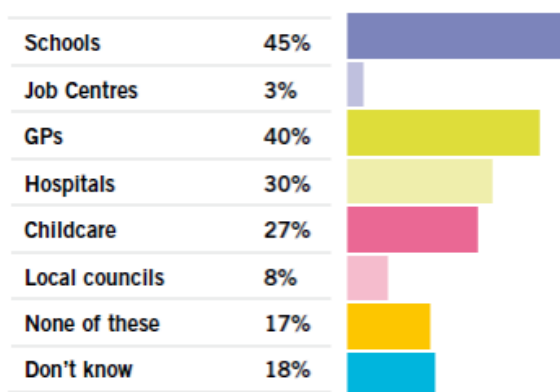
During the Family Commission, we also asked families which services they considered family friendly, and unfortunately the results were not good. Families could not identify a single public service which more than half thought was family friendly, while 17% felt that

¹ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/resources/articles/managing-shift-work.htm>

no public services at all were. Further, only 3% of families felt that Jobcentre Plus was family friendly, and only 8% thought their local council was family friendly.

From the YouGov Poll 2

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



It is clear that public services still have a long way to go to meet the needs of the families who need to access them. A significant challenge will be for government – both local and national – to ensure that families have access to all the services they need to flourish. Though children’s centres remain a much valued resource across the country, youth services

have come under significant pressure as a result of the recent reductions in local authority funding, and many family focused services may also be imperiled by the recent merging of the Early Intervention Grant with local authorities’ general revenue streams. Where families cannot access the support they need – whether this relates to accessing decent housing, supporting young people to develop their skills and leadership, or ensuring parents can access healthcare – then services cannot be described as family friendly.

The hours which services run also have a significant impact on families’ lives, whether that relates to parents’ ability to juggle work with picking their children up from school, or their ability to access housing, debt, or relationship support alongside their daily routines. There is much that government can do to make services available in hours that work for families, and to ensure that families can access services conveniently, and where possible, together

Childcare is a key public service which remains inaccessible to those who work shifts or anti-social hours. As any parent who works such hours can testify – the overwhelming majority of childcare is built around the 9-5 working day, and accessing quality care outside of that window can be extremely difficult. This lack of affordable childcare can make it extremely difficult for those parents who need to access health or other public services, for themselves or their children, without disrupting their working day or their children’s education.

4Children is advocating a flexible approach to childcare which complements a core 'office hour' service with more flexible evening care through childminders. We hope to test such a blended approach over the coming year.

Alongside better opening hours, some public services may benefit from the provision of crèche facilities to enable parents to access services. Where this isn't possible, services should work collaboratively with their local children's centre or their local authority to make parents aware of the availability of local childcare. Where the level of available childcare is insufficient to meet families' needs, local authorities should consider their obligations under the Childcare Act 2006, and work to build childcare capacity in support of existing public services.

Are there any types of family that face particular obstacles to their work/life balance?

4Children's 2010 Family Commission's put a key focus on work-life balance. Our findings consistently reported how few families felt that they could achieve it.

A quarter of parents who answered the 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 mothers to answer the question in this way.

Evidence suggests, it is low income families who find a healthy and fulfilling work-life balance most difficult to attain. Particularly in areas where rent, childcare and other costs are high, parents on low incomes often find it necessary to work extremely long hours to provide their families the quality of life they deserve.

An improvement in terms and conditions for low paid workers or a move towards a living wage across the country are clearly important for low paid families to help achieve a good work/life balance. However, the government can also work with businesses to expand measures – such as flexible working – which are positive for both families and employers. Though we welcome the steps undertaken in the government's recently published response to the Modern Workplaces consultation to expand access to flexible working, and ensure that parental leave can be more easily split between parents, we believe that more can be done on this front.

Parents in low income employment also report that their employment is less secure – and that they feel less confident asking for flexible working, or taking the amount of maternity/paternity leave they would like to take. One reason that more parents do not make use of their right to request flexible working is a lack of awareness, from both themselves and their employers. 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.

However, 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.² Improving communication about the benefits of flexible working – and the right to request – must be a priority.

The ongoing recession has had a number of impacts on the labour market which have in turn affected families; in some ways making different demands upon policy makers. Most significantly, unemployment has risen substantially, and there has been a significant shift from full-time to part-time work.

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 identified important trends. Parents 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.

Case Study: 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.

Two small scale surveys undertaken in the first half of 2010³ 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.⁴ These surveys reflect what families told the Family Commission and are

² Women and Work Commission – Shaping a Fairer Future, Women and Work Commission, 2009

³ www.equifax.co.uk and www.peninsula-uk.com

⁴ Office of National Statistics figures put the number at 1.1 million in 2009 (around 3%) with a lower overall rise, despite a tangible increase in the number of men with second jobs. www.statistics.gov.uk

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.

Faced with such pressures, evidence suggests that parents are changing their working routines and caring arrangements. Parents told the Family Commission that they increasingly have to rely on friends and family or on 'shift parenting'⁵ (see the case study above) 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.⁶ 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.

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.

Young families may also find it difficult to secure a strong work/life balance – particularly when they are expecting children. Though the government has made strong steps towards allowing parents to share parental leave, there is more that could be done to support fathers to take up their new rights. International evidence highlights that father's are unlikely to take up their access to leave unless it is specifically assigned to them, and that it attracts a comparable rate of pay to their paid work.

Statutory Maternity and Paternity Pay in the UK is low by international standards – which discourages both parents from accessing the leave they are legally entitled to. It is likely that this will be particularly problematic for fathers seeking to take time off. In order to address this, the government must consider moving to a system of SMP/SPP based more closely on parents' incomes in the long term.

⁵ When parents work opposite shifts to allow them to share the childcare and avoid childcare fees.

⁶ Children's Nurseries: UK Market Report 2009, P Blackburn, Laing Buisson, 2009

While low-income families cover a significant section of the population, other family groups are also finding access to public services challenging. For single parents, the challenge of finding affordable and flexible childcare is greater than for couple families – as is the challenge posed by the current labour market. Additional help for single parents remains a priority to ensure financial independence.

BME families, and those who have recently moved to the UK, also face significant challenges in accessing public services. Many families who are new to the UK will not have family networks to fall back on for childcare support and will rely more frequently on formal childcare. Ensuring that childcare is both affordable and accessible will therefore be crucial.

Our report 'Families New to the UK' identified steps that can be taken to encourage families with additional language or cultural needs to access the services they need, recommending that local authorities provide both welcome packs and support groups for new families arriving in the UK. Welcome packs and support groups could be available or run in local community facilities such as Sure Start Children's Centres and libraries.

How important is public transport to the ability of low-and middle-income earners to find work and access services? How can it be improved? What lessons from London's public transport network can be rolled out to the rest of the country?

Where public transport is affordable, reliable and frequent it can be an incredible boon to low and middle income families. Running a car is expensive and often walking or travelling by bike is not an option for families with young children, or elderly relatives to take care of. However, in too much of the country – particularly in rural areas and smaller towns and cities – public transport is inadequate and unable to meet the needs of families needing to travel to work or school, or trying to access children's centres and other public services.

It is also often prohibitively expensive – and fares have continued to rise at above inflation for the past five years as incomes for the majority of the population has shrunk in real terms.

The London transport system manages to be both largely reliable and very frequent, particularly in the centre of the city. The efforts undertaken by Transport for London, London Boroughs and the Government, to secure free travel for school children and the elderly also makes the scheme highly accessible, even to those most in need. While the current Mayor's decision to remove the travel subsidy afforded to those on Jobseekers Allowance was, in our view, an error – there is much to be learned from London's public transport.

However – in order to replicate these successes, significant investment will need to be made. Only when the public transport infrastructure is developed enough to effectively ensure that people do not need cars to complete their journey in a reasonable timescale

will substantial use of public transport be made. Ensuring access for parents with prams or buggies, and transport for disabled people remains a priority.

I am grateful for the opportunity of responding to this consultation, and I look forward to discussing these issues with you.

Yours sincerely,



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