

Protect, support, provide

Examining the role of
grandparents in families
at risk of poverty

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**The Equality and Human Rights Commission's
policy response**

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Introduction

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) has been working in partnership with Grandparents Plus on a project to examine the grandparental contribution in today's changing families, and the impact that this has on both older people's poverty and child poverty.

The final report, *Protect, support, provide - examining the role of grandparents in families at risk of poverty*, shows that:

- Changes such as an ageing population and the growing diversity of family life are increasing the contributions that grandparents make.¹
- Working-age women on lower incomes are the most likely to make the biggest contribution.²
- Working-class women are more likely to be young grandmothers, under the age of 50, than middle-class women (22% compared to 5%).³

This has potential implications for grandparents' ability to engage in paid employment, for their health and for the continuation of intergenerational poverty in some families.

The government has the aim of achieving an 80% employment rate. As work remains the best route out of poverty, it is important to consider how increasing the employment rate of parents may place additional demands on grandparents, particularly when they may also want and need to remain in employment themselves. The employment of parents and older people is necessary for the realisation of the 80% aspiration, and as such any measures taken need to ensure that the whole family is able to balance their responsibilities between work and family life.

¹ Grandparents Plus, *Rethinking Family Life*, 2009

² BSA data analysis; see Griggs, *The Poor Relation: interim report*, Grandparents Plus, 2009

³ BSA data; see *The Poor Relation: interim report*, 2009

Policy implications

Filling the knowledge gaps

This report begins to fill in the gaps in our knowledge regarding the contribution that grandparents make to today's families, as well as the impact of this on their economic situation. However, this work has highlighted the lack of up-to-date analysis in this area and the fact that more research needs to be done.

Further research into the role of grandparents will allow the identification of those groups providing the most support, highlight any negative implications that this has on their economic situation or health and show the specific barriers they face. In turn this will ensure that measures and services to support the wider family are targeted and effective.

We are therefore calling for:

- **The government to ensure the comprehensive collection of information on the role of and contributions made by grandparents and the impact this has on their lives and their families, disaggregated by equality strand.**

Flexible working

The Commission's Working Better project found demand among older workers for flexible working. Sixty-eight per cent of those unemployed and aged between 50 and state pension age stated that greater availability of flexible and part-time work would help them to find jobs.⁴

As the population changes, there is a growth in the number of four- and five-generation families, which means an increase in the number of people who are 'sandwich carers' - that is, caring for both younger and older relatives. Some grandparents may be providing support for three generations, making balancing work and family life highly complex.

We are therefore calling for:

- **The removal of the default retirement age (DRA). We believe that removing this 'safety net' for employers would encourage more radical approaches to issues such as flexibility.**
- **The right to request flexible working extended to everyone. The business benefits of flexible working include reduced premises costs, increased staff morale and reduced sickness absence.**

⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission, Working better: the over 50s, the new work generation, 2010

Childcare

Government aims to increase the employment rate to 80% through reform of the welfare system, focusing on benefit claimants' obligations to seek work or to prepare for work, with personalised support to ensure that individuals have the capacity to engage in paid employment.

Although the Commission supports in principle the aims of reform, it is vitally important that suitable, affordable childcare facilities are available.

The Commission welcomed the recent inclusion of 'childcare' as a 'building block' in the Child Poverty Bill. This means that in preparing the UK strategy to tackle child poverty, the government must consider measures relating to childcare.

As well as this, the UK ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1986, which is a legally binding international Human Rights Treaty. CEDAW clearly states that sufficient, affordable childcare is an important component for the achievement of women's full equality. However, in 2008, the CEDAW Committee, in its concluding observations to the UK, raised concerns over the lack of available and affordable childcare in the Country and called upon the state to improve its childcare facilities.⁵

Finding appropriate childcare can be difficult, but for those focused on in this report - lone parents, ethnic minority families and families where a parent or child has a disability - it is harder still, which can increase pressure on grandparents to provide childcare. The report also highlights the possible tensions between both parents working and grandparents working, as it may only be due to the availability of the grandparents that parents have the stability and security to confidently access the labour market. In order to meet the 80% aspiration, government must consider the implications for the grandparents' ability to work if they are put under increased pressure to provide more childcare.

We are therefore recommending that:

- **Jobcentre Plus advisors look at employment implications for the wider family if an individual will be relying on grandparental care in order to return to work.**
- **Older workers' return-to-work initiatives should consider the impact of the provision of grandparental care on the grandparent and on the wider family.**

⁵ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Forty - first session 30 June–18 July 2008. Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Take-up of benefits

The increasing grandparental contribution can impact on those nearing retirement to the detriment of their finances.⁶ We know that pensioner poverty has fallen between 1997 and 2008, partly because of improvements in take-up of pension credit. However, about a third of those eligible (up to 1.8 million older people) are still not claiming it.⁷

It is therefore important that there is a renewed push at encouraging people to access the benefits to which they are entitled, particularly as being in receipt of such benefits passports you onto other forms of support. For example, the Energy Rebate Scheme will award eligible older people, in receipt of the guarantee element of Pension Credit, a rebate on their energy bills.

The Commission sees Sure Start centres as having a role here for the wider family. For example, grandparents using the centres should be able to access information about benefits and services.

Pensions

The Commission has strongly supported the reforms introduced in the 2007 and 2008 Pensions Acts. We support the introduction of credits to the Basic State Pension (BSP) for grandparents who care for members of their family aged 12 or under for more than 20 hours a week. However these credits do not extend to the State Second Pension (S2P) which under the reform package could provide an individual with as much income in retirement as their entitlement to the BSP. S2P entitlement will provide vital additional income in ensuring that an individual is above the poverty threshold, and that saving in a private or occupational pension will pay.

We therefore recommend that:

- **State Pension Credits for Grandparents should be extended to the State Second Pension.**

Human rights-based approach to tackling poverty

The Commission is committed to a human rights-based approach to tackling poverty. In the United Nations Development Programme's words: 'People living in poverty must be considered as the principal actors of development; they can no longer be seen as passive recipients; they are strategic partners rather than target groups. Human rights change in a fundamental way the relationship between

⁶ Grandparents Plus, Rethinking Family Life, 2009

⁷ Age Concern, More money in your pocket

service providers and service recipients, and between claim-holders and duty-bearers.’⁸

Integrating human rights into poverty-reduction strategies does not so much change ‘what’ is to be done as to ‘how’ and ‘why’ activities are undertaken.

Unfortunately there is a perception that human rights and poverty are two separate agendas. The Commission is currently working with the British Institute of Human Rights (BIHR) to explore how the use of a human rights-based approach to policy-making and policy-influencing helps those experiencing poverty to make the necessary changes to policy in order to increase their standard of living.

In developing policies to tackle both older people’s poverty and child poverty, people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage must have the opportunity to participate. For example, throughout the passage of the Child Poverty Bill, the Commission has been working to ensure that children are directly consulted in the preparation of the strategy to be drawn up by the government, which includes measures to tackle child poverty. We welcome the government’s commitment to do this.

We recommend that the Child Poverty Commission should:

- **Ensure that people experiencing poverty are involved and engaged in their work.**
- **Consider the impact of measures to tackle child poverty on the wider family, including grandparents.**

⁸ Poverty reduction and human rights. A practice note. June 2003

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