

March 2001

## **Response to Green Paper**

### ***Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice***

**DTI December 2000, Cm 5005**

From The Programme Day  
of the  
**Joseph Rowntree Foundation**  
Work and Family Life Programme

The JRF Work and Family Life Programme is a Programme of 14 funded research projects under three main themes: 1) The effects of work on family life; 2) employers' perspectives; and 3) the community implications of work and family life. Currently 4 projects are completed (and in the publication process) and the others are at various stages. In due course there will be a considerable research base emerging from this Programme that will have much to say on the issues raised in the Green Paper.

The points made below are observations that can be identified from emerging findings to date. Research teams attended a 'Programme Day' on 26 and 27 February 2001 which allowed discussion across the various projects.

#### **1. Researchers found that parents wanted to exert a right to look after their children themselves without experiencing social disapproval or disadvantage.**

##### ***Research base.***

Many parents feel they want to care for their own children, especially during the pre-school years. When working, many parents want to fit their working hours around each other in such a way that allows them to spend time with/care for their children. Informal child care arrangements are favoured by many parents because they often represent an extension of parental care practices and beliefs. Childminders are valued because they allow children to be looked after within a domestic rather than institutional setting. Parents' use of informal childcare arrangements was an expression of trying to retain substitute parental figures for their children while they worked. These findings applied to lone parents as well as parents in couples. The findings also suggest that parental choices regarding childcare reflect not only issues of affordability and availability of good quality childcare; they also reflect strong parental preferences for pre-school children to be looked after in non-institutional settings, and for childcare arrangements that are flexible and can more easily fit in with increasingly flexible working patterns. In rural areas there is a notable group of parents who have moved to live in rural areas to be able to adopt a lifestyle that includes spending time with their children, and fitting work around their family rather than vice-versa.

**2. It is important to make provisions/policy for parents in such a way that employers of women are not penalized.**

- In order to avoid inequities between employers' costs for allowing either parental leave or flexible working arrangements.

**3. Equally, for the pursuit of equal opportunities, both men and women need to have entitlements to be involved in parenting and flexible working arrangements -**

in order to:

- avoid any stigma being attached to taking leave;
- avoid any associated negative effects on longer term careers or promotion prospects of taking leave or working flexibly.

***Research base for 2 and 3.***

Women and men are distributed unequally through different sectors and different types of employment. Any burden for employers of new policies will fall unequally on some employers rather than others if they refer to one or other gender. On the whole, policy has tended to give rights to women. This means that employers of women are carrying unequal employee burdens. Employers are clearly worried by the prospect of increased legislation, especially SMEs. It is important in future to work towards equality in the burdens carried by employers in order to avoid them wanting to discriminate against particular groups of workers. To this end it is also important to give rights to parents which allow a sharing of parenting responsibilities and allow each parent certain time off, not necessarily at the same time as each other. This would point to the policy of keeping paternity leave (where both parents are off work together) fairly short, but allowing any other parental leave entitlements or hours flexibility for each parent to be longer, but attached to each parent and non-transferable. The research base suggests that some fathers are actively involved in looking after their children. Measures should be put in place to facilitate both mothers' and fathers' participation in childcare.

Researchers challenged the DTI research evidence that currently there are no significant problems attached to maternity leave provision. It is suspected that there are pockets where serious disruption is being felt where women are the main workforce and there is excess demand in the labour-market (e.g. primary school teaching - where time off leaves the school without supply cover, and with extra workloads for existing staff who are already feeling hard-pressed.) The failure to recognise these problems through research may be due to data being collected via approaches to local authorities as employers, rather than via individual units e.g. schools and head teachers. There may be other services with similar problems in the public sector. One finding from the secondary analysis of the Workplace Employee Relations Survey

was that an increase in family-friendly provisions was associated with reduced commitment to work among public sector employees.

Any pockets of more severe disruption from parental or maternity leave rights need to be considered for government help. In the case of primary schools there is the added motivation that these disruptions can be harming children's education and - for all schools - where school closures are necessitated due to staff shortages, difficulties will arise for parents trying to juggle work and family responsibilities.

#### **4. Support is expressed for the range of incentive measures listed on page 55 in the Green Paper to encourage business to adopt flexible working arrangements.**

- There is scope for increased flexibility among SME employers through increasing their awareness of the benefits, and the ways other employers are using flexibility successfully. Use of local agencies to promote awareness and organise co-operation between employers to address local needs should be promoted.

#### ***Research base.***

Some employers who do not allow flexible working arrangements do not realise that employers with similar labour forces or market constraints have been able to devise work schedules in ways that do allow employees flexibility. Also, there was evidence that local Fair Play organisers have been able to get employers to co-operate in the provision of child care facilities where it would be too costly for any one employer to take the initiative. There are no reasons why other local agencies should not be used to provide the necessary linkages and initiative; e.g. EYDCPs, SBSs, Regional Development Agencies - especially where large costs are involved.

The research in rural areas suggests that informal flexibility can be as important as the presence of formal flexibility policies, and that this requires changes in organizational culture and the creation of more trusting employer-employee relations.

#### **5. SME employers are unlikely to take up offers of help to promote flexibility unless a package is presented that will do the complete job.**

#### ***Research base.***

There was evidence in East Anglia of TECs having offered SMEs £1000 to do a workforce care audit but no SMEs could be persuaded to take this up. They would have had to organise the data collection and instruments for themselves; find employee as well as employer-time to think about the implications; etc. Business pressures and constraints were too tight.

**6. Support is expressed for the right to work part time after maternity/paternity leave for a period of 5 years to be shared between parents (each having part of the right).**

This is based on the evidence provided in the Green Paper that parents prefer this option to more extended leave. It also helps to reduce the uncertainty for employers about women's return to work after maternity leave. It needs to be shared between mothers and fathers in order to promote equity of burden between employers. Such a policy stands to benefit families and children who feel under time pressure without depreciation of skills for the labour market or employers. Also the majority of employers now use part time work for some jobs and are familiar with the regulations and insurance implications surrounding it. This policy is also realistic in view of point 7 below. If a fixed term is attached to this provision, a right of return to full-time hours is implied by this entitlement but may need to be spelled out. If the entitlement were to be offered in a more open-ended way, the right to return to full-time employment should be made clear, with some provision being made for employers to adjust to this.

**7. New policies and provisions should not presume on a large untapped supply of child care or other care workers being available to provide care.**

***Research base.***

Evidence is mounting from the JRF study of childminders and indirectly from other research that people who want to do low paid jobs in caring are becoming scarcer. The range of alternative opportunities is increasing and these jobs offer greater rewards to an increasingly skilled women's workforce with more time flexibility than in the past. The nature of care work, its skill, status and rewards, as well as caring needs, all need considerable re-thinking.

**8. Examining the effects on children's education of their mothers working, especially full time, when they were very young, gives support for**

- a longer period of maternity leave;
- the opportunity to work part time while children are in the pre-school years.

***Research base.***

One study (not discussed at the Programme Day due to its imminent publication) carried out a sophisticated econometric modelling of the effects on children's later education of mothers (and fathers) working while their children were young. The study found evidence of some negative effects, especially from mothers' full time employment when children are aged one to five years.