









## Employers, communities and family-friendly employment policies

Large numbers of employees now combine both paid employment and caring responsibilities. This raises important issues for the organisation of work and family life. New research explores employee and managerial experiences in two different localities and in three different sectors of employment – local government, supermarkets and retail banking – where family-friendly employment policies are being implemented. The researchers – Sue Yeandle, Rosemary Crompton, Andrea Wigfield and Jane Dennett – surveyed employees and interviewed managers, employed carers and care providers. The research team, based at Sheffield Hallam and City Universities, found that:

-  Fifty per cent of employees surveyed, including those with care responsibilities, were unaware of the family-friendly policies of their employers.
-  In both localities, employers had very few links with local care service providers.
-  Relatives were the main source of help for employed carers. Carers in Sheffield were more able to draw on support from relatives than carers in Canterbury. This reflects lesser geographical mobility in Sheffield, and lower employment rates.
-  Managers' understanding of the policies they were responsible for implementing varied. Many felt they had not received suitable training and guidance about implementation issues.
-  Employees and managers sometimes struggled to balance carers' needs for flexibility with service delivery. Where workers could readily substitute for each other, as in supermarkets, flexible systems could be introduced with minimal disruption. This was more difficult where jobs were highly specialised. Most managers were sympathetic to carers' needs; there was little evidence of hostility to employed carers.
-  In the bank and the local authorities, recent reorganisations and leaner staffing were barriers to effective implementation of family-friendly employment policies.
-  Local managers in the same organisation did not interpret policies differently, although individual discretion created some ambiguity and variation.
-  While managerial discretion was crucial in enabling employees to integrate their work and caring responsibilities, it could lead to perceived inequities in the treatment of individuals.

## Background

Increasingly, both men and women in employment also have caring responsibilities. In 1999, over 10 million employees lived with their dependent children, and 13 per cent of adults provided care for a sick, disabled or older person, two-thirds of them alongside employment.

Since 1997, a variety of policy changes affecting employees with care responsibilities have been introduced. These cover part-time working, working time, employees' rights to time off to deal with caring situations, and changes to entitlements to parental leave. National strategies for carers and for childcare have also been introduced.

This new research investigates how carers with all kinds of responsibilities manage their employment and family lives. The study was carried out in three types of organisation: retail banking, supermarkets and local government. It compares experience in each organisation in the two contrasting localities of Sheffield and Canterbury.

## Employees with caring responsibilities

The extent of caring responsibilities varied within the organisations, and reflected differences in both the age structure and length of service of the workforce in the two localities studied.

Overall, one in five of employees cared for a dependent adult and one in three cared for children (see Table 1).

## Employers: help with caring and awareness of policies

All six organisations had a wide range of family-friendly employment policies. In addition to statutory rights to leave, the options offered by one or more of the organisations included: compassionate leave,

carers' leave, flexi-time, voluntary reduced hours, 'responsibility breaks', emergency leave, and 'shift-swap'. In special situations, some of these options were available without loss of normal earnings. However, the available leave options and reduced hours were in most cases unpaid, or time had to be made up by the employee. In follow-up interviews and focus groups, the financial implications of taking special leave were often cited as a barrier to take-up.

Managerial awareness of these policies varied: the supermarket managers were particularly well-informed, while awareness among Sheffield local government managers was lower than expected. Employee awareness and use of the policies was similarly low, even among those with care responsibilities (Table 2). Most people did not express an opinion about their employer's help with care responsibilities, although overall, 22 per cent said they were 'dissatisfied'.

## Employed carers in different contexts

In comparison with Canterbury, Sheffield has a higher level of unemployment and a more geographically stable population. This stability was reflected in the much longer length of service of respondents in all three employment sectors in Sheffield. Thus, although in both localities relatives were the main source of help with caring, employees in Sheffield drew more on family resources, while in Canterbury, carers of children made greater use of private services. There was limited use of other commercial, voluntary or public household services in either locality.

## Policy implementation

The study was designed to explore, in the supermarket and the bank, whether local

**Table 1: Employees with caring responsibilities (%)**

	<i>for anyone (including children)</i>	<i>for sick or disabled adults (aged 16-64)</i>	<i>for older people (aged 65+)</i>	<i>for children (aged 16 and under)</i>
<b>Sheffield</b>				
Local govt	55	8	19	39
Retail banking	42	4	15	33
Supermarket	51	4	9	38
<b>Canterbury</b>				
Local govt	41	8	12	29
Retail banking	49	12	14	36
Supermarket	36	6	8	24
<b>All (n=945)</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>34</b>

**Table 2: Does your employer provide any kind of help or services for employees who have care responsibilities? (%)**

	<i>Banking</i>	<i>Supermarket</i>	<i>Local govt</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Number</i>
Yes	25	38	32	<b>32</b>	291
No	22	17	16	<b>18</b>	159
Don't know	53	45	52	<b>50</b>	456
<b>All (numbers)</b>	176	211	519	<b>100</b>	906

implementation of family-friendly policies differed from organisational intentions at the national level. The data show that although formal organisational policies provided the framework, policy implementation occurred on an informal, flexible basis, and reflected reciprocity between managers and employees. Carers reported that managerial discretion was central to achieving work-family balance and that managers who had care responsibilities themselves were more sympathetic to staff needs. Arising from this, some carers felt there were inequities in the treatment of individuals, even within the same organisation or work team. Managers felt obliged to balance family-friendly policies with service provision and delivery, and some expressed concerns about the potential for abuse. However, few examples of policy abuse were cited.

### Managers' perspectives

Managers believed there was a business case for offering family-friendly policies, but felt there was a lack of training, guidance, consultation and communication about this policy area. Both managers and employed carers felt that service delivery targets were becoming increasingly demanding, increasing pressures within their jobs. This posed some difficulty in responding positively and flexibly to carers' circumstances.

"We try and be as obliging as possible but it's very difficult because we need staff to serve customers, and for things like unpaid leave we don't have enough counter staff, so it's very difficult. I think we are understaffed anyway and so to let staff have more time off makes it even more difficult."  
(Bank: manager)

"Due to cuts we are short-staffed. ... if it's leave for emergency care then we just have to cope somehow, but it does increase the stress on other staff."  
(Local authority: manager)

### Carers' perspectives

Carers mainly used the options which gave them time flexibility. Carers of children stressed the lack of fit between working hours and the school timetable.

"You have this problem at the end of the day – a couple of hours' gap between the time that the school finishes and the time that you would normally finish work." (Local authority: employee)

"From hearing what everyone is saying, it does sound as if school holidays would be a time that perhaps employers could focus on because it is the one at which your heart sinks when you're just approaching it." (Local authority: employee)

Carers of older and disabled people, including disabled children, have particular needs. They were especially concerned about responding to unforeseen events.

"Now and again my mum in law [aged 87] is ill and I can't give 3 weeks notice to see her, so I would like to say to [my managers in the supermarket], 'I just have to go to help her. I'm her only child'."  
(Supermarket: employee)

"[I'm] unable to take odd days off in an emergency. Holidays are booked nearly a year in advance, and if any days are saved for 'emergencies' it is very difficult to obtain time off when needed."  
(Bank: employee)

There was concern that increased workplace pressures were making caring difficult. But carers also stressed that they valued the experience of employment; some emphasised that their income was essential.

### Types of support

Despite positive developments in national policy, the study found that there are still important regional and local variations in the services which can support employed carers. Only a minority of the carers made

use of formal care services: most employees who used these were satisfied with their arrangements. Employers were rarely involved in the formal care arrangements used by their staff. Despite their commitment to family-friendly practices, they had not established strong links with local service providers. From the review of local service provision, some examples of innovative practice emerged (see Box 1) and some practitioners delivering services felt new policies held the potential to offer better support for employed carers.

### Children Mean Business (CMB)

In Sheffield, CMB operates as a partnership between the local authority Young Children's Service, Sheffield Children's Information Service, Sheffield Out-of-School Network, the Pre-School Learning Alliance and Sheffield TEC (now South Yorkshire LSC). CMB has used European funding to develop childcare businesses and to promote family-friendly employment among employers. CMB runs business clubs for employers, works with employers' organisations to resolve work-life balance tensions, and uses its website to stimulate interest in flexible employment practices which support employed carers. It has gained valuable experience of offering tailored solutions to employers in responding to problems. Examples include addressing employees' increased absence during school holidays, and introducing childcare voucher schemes for staff. CMB's manager explained that one major employer had concerns about employees:

"They came to us for advice about what to do ... We linked them with various out of school clubs and looked at partnering them for a holiday playscheme. We assist companies to become responsible for childcare. ... There is a great potential for further growth - one of the things is to offer management training on family-friendly working."

can result in inequities between employees.

- There is scant evidence of opposition to family-friendly employment policies, among managers or employees.
- As family-friendly policies are susceptible to changes in business and organisational pressures, there is a continuing role for government.
- Policy development needs to recognise the differing needs of different categories of carer.
- Government support is needed to develop employer-community initiatives and to improve channels of communication between employers and care providers.

### About the project

The research compared employers, employees and service providers in two localities and three employment sectors. It included: comparison of localities and of local care provision; a self-completion questionnaire returned by 945 employees; case studies of 'family-friendly' employment policies in each organisation; interviews with managers, trade unions and employee representatives; interviews with care providers; and focus groups and interviews with different categories of employed carers.

The research was carried out by Sue Yeandle and Andrea Wigfield at Sheffield Hallam University (with assistance from Louise Ritchie) and by Rosemary Crompton and Jane Dennett at City University. The fieldwork was conducted between June 2000 and March 2001.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Employed carers and family-friendly employment policies** by Sue Yeandle, Rosemary Crompton, Andrea Wigfield and Jane Dennett, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 480 5, price £11.95).

### Policy implications

The results from the study suggest:

- There is a need to increase awareness of employers' policies.
- Unpaid leave helps some carers, and is welcomed by them, but its financial consequences are an important barrier to take-up.
- More training needs to be available for managers.
- This training needs to address differences in managers' approaches to implementation, which