Rethinking Family Life: exploring the role of grandparents and the wider family
Grandparents Plus is the national charity which champions the vital role of grandparents and the wider family in children’s lives - especially where they take on the caring role in difficult family circumstances.

We work to support grandparents and the wider family by:
- Campaigning for change
- Providing evidence, policy solutions and training
- Building alliances and networks, including with grandparents themselves so that they can have a voice
Introduction: living extended family lives

Perhaps now more than ever it is hard to be a child and tough to be a parent. Children are told that they are unhappy, stressed or damaged and parents are told that they are selfish, irresponsible and failing. Whatever side of the argument you are on, there is little doubt that in report after report the emphasis is heavily on the role that parents play, for good or ill, in bringing up their children.
As a society we continue to hold the nuclear model to be the preferred family structure for raising children. But as parents, children, aunts, uncles and grandparents, we regularly reach beyond our nuclear family model, or are forced to through bereavement or divorce, and live lives that look very different. Increasingly evidence shows that this nuclear family is only sustainable with the support of the wider family around it. Where the two parent household has broken down it is often grandparents and the wider family who step in to fill the gap, cushioning any adverse experiences that children may have. By focussing almost exclusively on the role of parents we both fail to listen to children, who repeatedly identify grandparents and other family members as key influencers in their lives, and set parents up to fail. We place even more pressure on mothers and fathers, ignoring the wider family altogether with commentators perpetuating the cycle of negativity around family life in which as a parent the only question is not whether but by how much you fail your children.

At Grandparents Plus we believe that the myth that the extended family is ‘dead’ and the preoccupation with the nuclear family means we miss the bigger picture. Perhaps most worryingly for politicians, policy makers and service providers, our analysis suggests that they may be out of touch with the reality of family life in Britain today. In this report we have brought together evidence which demonstrates that, one way or another, we are all living extended family lives. Economic and social drivers mean that grandparents are playing an ever-increasing role in supporting family life and caring for children. Families are extending both horizontally as a result of the increase in the number of step-family relationships and vertically, because of our ageing population, with four and even five generation families not uncommon. Through this changing family picture the role that grandparents and the wider family plays is significant; but it can be hidden, is often taken for granted and is little understood.

This report gathers existing evidence on grandparenting and the wider family, but we acknowledge that the evidence base is patchy and so while building on the research that we do have, we also point out some of the gaps. Because of the breadth of the ground that is covered here we do not attempt to explore each issue in depth. The aim is to demonstrate that when taken together we can see the wide range of ways in which grandparents and the wider family contribute to family life. Their role has been under-explored to date. **We believe that developing a clearer understanding of this role and shaping policy to support it is the next chapter of family policy.** Unless policy makers and service providers grasp the complexity of family life their interventions will be less effective and far less relevant. **But most importantly, children will lose out.**
Demographic change
There is no doubt that our population is ageing. ONS figures confirm that the number of over 65s has already overtaken the number of under 16s. By 2050 the number of over 85s will have quadrupled from 1.1 million in 2000 to 4 million. Women are having children later in life while a growing proportion are not having children at all. To a certain extent the decline in the working age population has been offset by migration, but it is unclear whether this trend will continue during the recession.

While some women have children later in life, and are likely to therefore become grandparents at an older age, other women become grandparents at a relatively young age. The average age at which someone becomes a grandparent is shifting and has been variously cited in recent years at anywhere between 47 – 54. The boundaries between ages and generations are becoming even more blurred.

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01. Changing family lives

4m
the number of over 85s by 2050

1 in 3
grandparents have a dependent child living with them
Different family structures
In the 2001 census one in 10 families were stepfamilies. They are now the fastest growing family formation. It is thought that one in three of us is part of a step-family. With marriage on the decline and the increase in cohabitation and second and subsequent family formations, the interplay and overlaying nature of family structures and relationships is becoming ever more complex. The Grandparents Association calculate that there are 14 million grandparents. A third of grandparents have a dependent child living with them and half of grandparents have a living parent of their own. The traditional image of the sandwich generation woman (for it is still women who provide most of the care) is caring for children and parents but she is increasingly likely to be managing three generational caring responsibilities, with the added complexity that a step-family may then bring.

There is little advice and support available to step-grandparents. But it is a role full of challenges and conflicting emotions. Just as step-parents have to find a way of developing a parental relationship with their partner’s child, their own parents in turn are facing similar challenges. And it has implications too for what children/step-children and grandchildren/step-grandchildren will be prepared to provide in terms of care and support when the time comes.

This multiplicity of roles (simultaneously as mother, carer, grandmother, step-grandmother) and circumstances requires the family to adapt and also means that the nuclear model becomes less and less relevant. Increasingly we live our lives as family networks which may have a nuclear “hub” at the centre but this does not and cannot exist in isolation.
The extent of grandparental childcare is considerable and has grown significantly with the increase in the number of women (mothers) returning to work.

In 1971 just under 60% of women were economically active. That figure has now risen to almost 75%\(^2\). Britain’s long working hours culture makes our parents some of the most ‘time poor’ in Europe. Grandparents have become the single biggest source of childcare after the parents themselves. A quarter of all families rely on grandparents for childcare\(^2\). Half of single parents depend on them\(^3\).

Age Concern valued the childcare contribution that grandparents make at £3.9 billion\(^2\). But an HSBC report costed the amount parents would spend on childcare (allowing for a proportion who would otherwise use nannies and other more expensive forms of childcare) if they did not use grandparents at a staggering £50 billion\(^2\). That is equal in size to the first stage of the Treasury’s credit crunch bank bail out.

An Institute of Education study found that grandparents provide over 40% of childcare for parents who are at work or studying and over 70% of childcare at other times\(^2\). Clearly cost is a major factor, as affordable childcare is still in short supply. A recent Daycare Trust survey\(^2\) showed that annual cost in England of a nursery place for a child under two has risen to £8,684. Despite the new duty in the Childcare Act (2006) on local authorities to ensure sufficient childcare provision in their area there is still a shortage of good quality, flexible, affordable childcare.
**Supporting parents**

The reason grandparents play such a huge role in family life, particularly childcare provision is because parents and children need them to. Recognising and valuing the role that grandparents play is therefore supporting parental choices and behaviour. By failing to do so society risks being out of touch with the reality of family life.

The arrival of a new baby is the most significant life-changing experience for parents. Grandparents, particularly maternal grandparents, often play a particularly active role at this time. Grandparents Plus’ survey\(^2\) found that parents were more likely to turn to their own mum or dad for advice about a new baby than anyone else.

We believe that this role should be recognised in a number of ways.

**ACTION**

Ensure that parents are given a full twelve months of paid parental leave that can be taken by either the mother or the father. This would ensure that grandparents are not placed under undue pressure to take on significant periods of care for their grandchildren.

Give working grandparents the opportunity to work flexibly.

Introduce a two week period of “granny leave” for working grandparents so that they can be involved in the care and support of their families at this crucial time.

As the recession begins to bite hard employers are understandably resistant to any additional regulatory requirements. But extending flexibility on a voluntary basis, including periods of leave for employees to support their families in the way we are suggesting here, could be a useful way for businesses to address the need to cut back on activity because of reduced demand.

Single parents, in particular, regard grandparental childcare as “the next best thing”. Half of single parents rely on grandparental childcare. A report for the Department of Work and Pensions\(^2\) found that lone parents placed particularly high value on their role as a parent and this affected their childcare choices. Grandparental childcare is particularly trusted and valued by them. This was cited as a factor over and above cost. It was an emotional decision as well as an economic one. We want to see government and service providers do more to support and facilitate family involvement so that families can care for themselves.

**flexibility**

Grandparents also tend to be more flexible. They are often asked to fill the gaps between formal childcare and parental care. They will also care for the child who is sick when a nursery would refuse to have them. Nurseries, extended schools and childminders tend not to work beyond 6pm. For parents who work shifts or irregular hours formal childcare simply isn’t enough.

If a parent has a child with a disability, they may have little or no option but to ask grandparents to step in as suitable, good quality formal childcare that can meet the needs of disabled children is in particularly short supply.

When parents place their child with a grandparent they do so because they believe that it will be the most appropriate source of childcare for their child. It is a legitimate choice for them and one society should respect.

The growth in formal childcare provision in recent years has not led to the expected reduction in informal childcare.

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4 out of 10 parents are more likely to turn to grandparents to provide help with childcare in the current economic climate.
Other external drivers such as the credit crunch and ensuing recession suggest that as unemployment grows parents may need less childcare overall, but those who do will be more likely to turn to informal childcare in order to keep costs down. Grandparents will be the ones under pressure to provide that childcare. Our own survey\textsuperscript{2.10} suggests that over four out of 10 (44\%) parents are more likely to turn to grandparents to provide help with childcare in the current economic climate. As the table on p11 shows, mothers employed in professional, clerical and manual work all used grandparental childcare but those in less professional roles and who are less well paid are more likely to rely on grandparents.

**Good quality childcare**

There is considerable and conflicting evidence about the impact of daycare on very young children (under 3s). Some commentators argue that prolonged periods of care in a nursery setting for very young children does not give them the one to one care they need. While a recent Institute of Education report\textsuperscript{2.11} found that children who had been in daycare from nine months were more “school ready” than those who had been cared for by grandparents. For toddlers the opportunity to interact and play with other children becomes more important for their development. The study found that children cared for by grandparents tended to have a good vocabulary but were more likely to demonstrate behavioural problems. This is thought to be because they had fewer opportunities to interact with other children. At Grandparents Plus we believe that we are preparing children for life, not just for school. School readiness is therefore one measure but it doesn’t reflect the full picture.

The Childcare Act (2006) states that local authorities must take steps to identify parents (the definition of which includes all adults with care of children) who would be unlikely to take advantage of children’s services in their area and to take steps to reach them. It is important that service providers recognise that grandparent carers need to be reached so that the children they care for can benefit from the social interaction and facilities available to them. Dedicated grandparent-toddler groups are one way of addressing this. Promoting the services in a way which targets grandparents is also critical. For example services could be promoted in post offices, supermarkets and doctors surgeries.

**ACTION**

We want to see grandparents proactively targeted and encouraged to make full use of children’s centres, Sure Start and other local services so that the children they care for can benefit from what is available.

**Case study**

**Westminster Children’s Society**

Westminster Children’s Society is responsible for the early years education of more than 600 children in 18 community nurseries across London, we are especially aware of the challenges faced by the increasing number of disconnected families we support.

And with so many of our parents returning to work having found affordable childcare, the shared support offered by available grandparents is even more important - and so positively encouraged by all our nursery staff.

This may be a simple matter of making our grandparents feel as welcome and important as parents when they bring or collect their grandchildren from our nurseries or the number of projects we foster, involving all generations from across the local community.

A child’s future opportunities are often decided at a very early age, and we believe the best possible start must be for everyone involved - parents, friends, extended family members and childcare professionals - to work closely together to secure that future.
We believe that the vast majority of parents will strive to make the best choice for their child given their own particular circumstances. Some will have supportive grandparents who are able to help out. Others will not. Some will have good quality nursery provision which suits their working hours while others will struggle to find what they need from formal provision. Most families will also be facing the financial reality that they cannot afford for one parent to stay at home, relying on just one income, whether they want to or not.

Whatever form of childcare parents choose it should be recognised and supported. This includes informal childcare. The fact is that parents make a positive choice when they use informal childcare because they feel their child is loved and well cared for in that setting. For some families that will always be their preference and as a society we should respect, value and support that. But importantly, the emphasis on parental choice has to be balanced by the grandparent’s right to say ‘no’. Parents can reasonably request grandparental help with childcare but grandparents can equally reasonably refuse. We must also consider the impact on the future of childcare provision of future generations of grandparents being less willing or able to provide it.

Recognition for grandparental care

The care that grandparents provide has too often been excluded from the childcare debate when in fact they are still the single biggest source of childcare after the parents themselves. If we are going to recognise the role that grandparents play in caring for children, particularly if parents are enabled to return to work then we need to address the question of the form that recognition may take. The “commodification” of care is not a straightforward issue and must be considered carefully. An arrangement that has been a private matter then becomes public as soon as it is quantified and a value placed on it. But if we do not adopt this approach grandparents and the families they care for will be no better off as a result. Attaching a monetary value to the informal care provided by grandparents is therefore essential to society valuing it at all.

Payment

Nine out of 10 (92%) grandparents are not paid for the childcare they provide. Nor do they qualify for the childcare tax credit, so parents cannot claim any financial help in order to pay them. The only way a grandparent can qualify is if they take steps to become registered as a childminder, including registering to care for children who are not their grandchildren. So as a society we have the anomaly that the most popular form of childcare is also the least recognised. Six out of 10 (61%) people, including seven out of 10 (70%) mothers agree that grandparents should receive some kind of reward or payment from the state for providing childcare.

6 out of 10 people agree grandparents should be paid for childcare
On the other hand, many grandparents readily acknowledge that they care for their grandchildren for ‘love not money’ and some would be offended by the offer of payment either directly from their son/daughter or indirectly from the state for the service they provide. The cost of paying grandparents would be significant, even if we were to adopt the approach of paying them at a reduced rate as recommended by the Centre for Social Justice. There is the added consideration that those who are already retired would not expect to be economically active themselves so the opportunity cost for them and for the economy of the care they provide is less than it would be for those who would otherwise be in paid work. However many will expect and prefer to be doing other things with their time, so there is an opportunity cost to them, they also free up their son or daughter to return to work. **But most importantly, the caring contribution they make has an intrinsic value in itself.**

**Case study**

German grandparents are being offered the opportunity to take paid time off work to care for grandchildren under new legislation which came into force in January 2009. Grandparents will be allowed to request leave from work if they can prove their support is needed to raise the children because the child’s parent is studying or in training. Teenage pregnancy is a growing problem in Germany with over 6,100 children born to under 18s in 2006.

**ACTION**

Grandparents Plus believes that parental childcare choices should be fully recognised and supported. Parents should be able to claim childcare tax credits for the childcare that grandparents provide if it enables them to work.

**Case study**

Rashmi is married and works full time as a telesales advisor. She has an 18 month old son. Rashmi’s mum and dad care for their grandson 9am-6pm every day so that she can go to work. She has to work to keep up her mortgage payments. Her parents are in their 50s and both feel they should be entitled to some financial recognition for the contribution they make. Rashmi says, “We cannot afford childcare. My parents help because they see me struggling.”

Existing evidence suggests that three out of 10 grandparents are of working age. It could be argued that those grandparents who give up work or reduce their working hours in order to provide childcare are making a bigger sacrifice than those who are already retired. Their own income will probably be reduced. Their pension provision may be adversely affected if they have incomplete contribution records. Unlike parents of children under 12 or other carers there is currently no provision in the forthcoming pension reforms which take effect from April 2010 for grandparents to be given a credit towards their basic state pension if they provide substantial periods of care. This is defined as twenty hours per week or more. This group of grandparents is also likely to grow as state retirement age shifts to 67, 68 and beyond. Yet there is no research to identify how many are in this situation, what their National Insurance contribution records might be and how much care this group of grandparents in particular is providing on a weekly basis.
ACTION

Grandparents Plus is calling for all working age grandparents to be entitled to a credit towards their National Insurance contributions in the same way as parents, foster carers and carers of disabled adults if they provide care for 20 hours per week or more.

Rewarding care with care

The caring contribution that grandparents make is substantial. If they are not to be paid at the point of providing that care, what alternative form of recognition might be possible? Reports by ILC UK and others shows that our ageing population has placed the intergenerational contract under strain, particularly in terms of pension provision but also because of the pressing need to reform social care. But unless we recognise the true value of grandparental childcare the intergenerational contract is incomplete.

We believe that grandparental childcare is an intrinsic part of the intergenerational exchange of care and resources. Therefore as part of any reformed social care system, the care that grandparents provide today should credit them towards the care they may need for themselves tomorrow. This would not take the form of a cash payment, but rather a repayment in the form of discounted care for the contribution that they have already made.

We know that we are all expected to live longer and with more complex health needs. Reports from Counsel and Care and others argue that the existing social care system is unsustainable. As a result we are all going to be expected to contribute more towards our own care. But the unpaid caring contribution we may have made earlier in our lives should count. It should ensure that we benefit from a reduction in the cost of that care when we come to pay for it. In this way periods of care could be ‘banked’ throughout our lives. Parents would not have to pay for grandparental childcare and grandparents would know that whenever they needed personal social care their own caring contribution will help to offset some of the cost of that care. It is not uncommon for older people to have to sell their homes to pay for the care they need. This approach would also help to safeguard their property as a legacy for their children and grandchildren while at the same time being consistent with the need to encourage personal responsibility and the philosophy of ‘something for something’.

ACTION

We want to see further exploration of intergenerational reciprocity to establish how we could reward care with care to find appropriate alternative forms of recognition for a grandparent’s caring contribution.

55% agree grandparents should have right to request flexible working
Access to flexible working

Even, and perhaps, especially during the current recession some employers approach flexibility as a way of working that can help their business cope with the changing circumstances, rather than simply a ‘perk’ or concession made to a particular group. Parents of children under six and carers of disabled adults have the right to request flexible working, and the government is due to extend that right to parents of older children, but rather than apply it to only those groups employers often find that it is easier and fairer to operate if everyone has it. Older workers may want to work more flexibly as they approach retirement; others may want to a better work life balance to do voluntary work, to study or simply because they want more leisure time.

The Equal Opportunities Commission’s investigation into flexible working documented how employers are approaching flexibility. In many workplaces flexible working is about how an organisation or a business runs itself. The right to request flexible working is not applied as a concession being made to a particular group. Nor does everyone seek the same kind of flexibility. Some will want to flex their hours, others their location. In practice a small degree of flexibility can make a big difference to the sustainability of someone’s employment and the viability of a business.

A NatCen study found that both grandparents and parents were more likely to enjoy providing childcare when it was part-time or when they could work flexibly. Grandparents at work may feel under pressure to help their own children, particularly with the arrival of a new baby or at times of crisis, but they have no right to request flexible working and it probably would not occur to them to make that request. Most employers will not know how many grandparents are in their workplaces nor who would benefit from this flexibility. We are urging employers who already operate flexible working policies to extend them to grandparents. The most efficient way to do this would actually be to extend flexible working to all staff.
We want to see:

1. Paid parental leave of up to 12 months that mothers or fathers could afford to take would ensure that the first year of a child’s life is spent in the care of at least one parent. This would also enable grandparents to help out without feeling under pressure to step in to provide childcare.

2. Employers who already have flexible working practices extending flexibility to grandparents. The most efficient way to do this would be to extend flexibility to everyone.

3. Special family leave or “granny leave” for grandparents of up to two weeks which could be taken at any point in the child’s first year. As a first step this could be introduced on a voluntary basis.

4. Parental childcare choices fully recognised and supported. Parents should be able to claim childcare tax credits for the childcare that grandparents provide if it enables them to return to work.

5. Grandparents proactively targeted and encouraged to make full use of children’s centres, Sure Start and other local services so that the children they care for can benefit from what is available.

6. An end to the pensions penalty. A weekly grandparents National Insurance credit to ensure that working age grandparents who provide care for children for 20 hours per week or more are treated in the same way as parents, foster carers and carers of disabled adults.

7. Further exploration of intergenerational reciprocity to establish how we could reward care with care to find appropriate alternative forms of recognition for a grandparent’s caring contribution.

Summary:
We need to recognise and value the substantial caring contribution that grandparents make.
Filling the parent gap

Perceptions of the contribution grandparents make in the lives of their grandchildren usually focus on their role with younger children, particularly in terms of childcare.

The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children found an association between grandparental closeness and child adjustment when children were on average nine years old but at age 14 that link had disappeared. But new research has found that grandparents do play a significant, if different role in the lives of their teenage grandchildren. In fact grandparents are increasingly becoming replacement partners where one parent is absent, or assuming greater proportion of the parental role where both parents are “time poor” and cannot fulfil that role themselves.

For example, half (52%) of the teenagers in the study reported grandparental involvement in their school, which given the age of the children (11-16) is particularly high. Grandparents were helping with problems such as bullying or attending school events like parental consultations or sports days.
Maternal grandparents played a larger role than paternal grandparents with more than eight out of 10 teenagers saying that maternal grandmothers discussed their future plans with them and gave ‘good advice’ for problems. Outside of their immediate family almost nine out of 10 teenagers rated their maternal grandmother as the most important person, closely followed by maternal grandfather, paternal grandmother and paternal grandfather.

There has been a trend for families to become increasingly geographically separated but this is not as pronounced as we may think. The popular belief that grandparents live some distance from their grandchildren is not borne out by the evidence. One study found that seven out of 10 (69%) live within 10 miles of their grandchildren\(^3\) while a recent DCSF report\(^4\) cites four in 10 grandparents living within 15 minutes of their grandchildren and seeing them several times each week.

**Buffers in times of crisis**

A growing body of evidence shows that grandparents provide vital support for parents and grandchildren, particularly in times of need or family disruption. A key time of crisis for children is when parents separate. It is thought that nearly half of all children in the UK will see their parents divorce\(^5\). Although divorce rates are actually falling (from over 153,000 in 2003 to 128,000 in 2007\(^6\)) and have reached their lowest level for 28 years, the overall picture on separation is complicated by the growing number of cohabiting couples, rising from 9% of all families in 1971 to 14% in 2006\(^7\).

The proportion of births outside marriage has also risen from 12% in 1980 to 44% of all births in 2007 and continues to grow\(^8\). We know that cohabiting couples are more likely to separate.

It can be problematic to generalise here as there will always be examples of grandparents who are a negative influence in these situations, but research\(^9\) has found that grandparental involvement is significantly associated with reduced maladjustment in families experiencing divorce or separation. They act as “buffers” to mitigate against some of the negative effects, providing essential anchors and continuity for children when everything else around them may be changing. They also provide increasing support for parents, particularly maternal grandparents for single mothers. Conversely paternal grandparents may also be the ones to help facilitate communication between their sons and their former partners, encouraging contact.

**ACTION**

Recognising the importance of communication and also the role of grandparents as influencers in their families, we want to see more family counselling and mediation services involving grandparents and also targeting them with their services.
Financial support
Evidence suggests that where grandparents are able to do so, they provide considerable financial support for their grandchildren. Indeed some are helping grandchildren more than their own children. The practice of “inheritance skipping” is becoming more widespread. It has been estimated that £4 billion a year is already inherited by second generations. In a recent survey 31% of grandparents had put money aside to help get their grandchildren on the property ladder. A recent HSBC study found that 16% of grandparents in their 60s and one third of grandparents in their 70s provide financial support to grandchildren. Grandparents are also contributing £470 million to Child Trust Funds each year with one in 10 making monthly direct debit contributions.

Older generations are often providing more financial support than they are receiving from family and friends. The recession means that families are becoming even more dependent upon grandparental help.

A Grandparents Plus YouGov survey found that almost one third (30.5%) of parents said that in the current financial situation they were either likely or very likely to turn to their own mum or dad for financial help.

£4bn a year is already inherited by second generations

Summary:
Grandparents are playing an increasing role in supporting family life, filling the parenting gap in a variety of ways, particularly in times of crisis.

We want to see:
1. more family counselling and mediation services involving grandparents and also targeting them with their services.
Influencing parents
We have already outlined above the ways in which grandparents can influence parents at times of crisis, particularly during separation and divorce. But grandparents can also hold sway over parents’ day to day choices and behaviour. Parents tell us that they regularly turn to grandparents for advice and information. When asked who they would go to for advice about their child’s health and fitness one third (32%) said their own mum or dad ahead of friends, the internet or other media. In the recession parents are increasingly likely to turn to grandparents for advice and support with almost six out of 10 (57%) saying they are either likely or very likely to do so.

Perhaps the most significant point of grandparental influence over parents is when a baby is born. Grandparents were by far the biggest influencer at this point, ahead of doctors, other healthcare professionals, friends and family members. Over six out of 10 (63%) parents said that their own mum or dad was important in supporting them and their immediate family when they had a baby.

Explicitly targeting grandparents with advice and information is therefore critical to reaching parents. Yet government campaigns such as the Department of Health’s Change for Life campaign repeatedly fail to do this and as a result risk limiting their impact and effectiveness.

ACTION
We want to see all relevant government campaigns, particularly those aimed at changing parental or family behaviour, including a strategy for reaching and influencing grandparents.
**Educating children**

Researchers have found that increasing grandparental involvement (i.e., more than closeness) is associated with better child adjustment and fewer peer problems. Sharing a grandchild’s hobbies and interests or grandparents’ involvement in school and education indicated a lower maladjustment score than those who did not have that degree of involvement. Significantly, these relationships then translate into caring relationships with grandparents and older people later in life.

A range of factors predicted grandparental involvement including the child’s age (the younger the child, the more involved grandparents were), living in a less deprived area, frequent contact, good grandparental health, and grandparent-grandchild closeness. Geographical proximity was not necessarily important as new technology overcomes these barriers.

Parents are important gatekeepers to these relationships. Where the relationship with either parent breaks down or becomes problematic then the grandparent is more likely to experience problems with contact (see chapter 6 below).

Passing on knowledge and skills through the generations is also a vital role for grandparents. For example, passing on nutritional information and cooking skills to children may be challenging for time-poor parents, but could be a practical role for grandparents to play which in turn helps to combat childhood obesity. Grandparents are significant educators, from teaching very young children to read and write through to soft social skills for teenagers, from history lessons through to practical know how. Children are sometimes more likely to listen to grandparents while parents may struggle to be heard.

**Shaping communities**

Recent research for the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that one in 10 of all children are now mixed race. This presents challenges for cultural and personal identity and requires greater focus on what gives us our identity and what we need to carry forward with us in to future generations. Grandparents and the wider family provide a living cultural heritage that children may need. Understanding our past is fundamental to understanding ourselves, giving us a stronger sense of personal security and identity. So by simply facilitating wider family involvement and supporting those family ties we may improve community cohesion.

A lack of understanding, leading to conflict between generations undermines community cohesion. Because older people and young people share a greater risk of living in poverty and are more likely to lack social capital, intergenerational practice to date has tended to focus on these two groups but not consider the need for a multigenerational approach that looks at bringing a range of generations together. Community cohesion has also failed to include family intergenerational experiences as part of that community picture when in fact they are inextricably linked. Communities are built on families.
Summary:
Grandparents are major influencers on parent and child behaviour and also help to shape communities.

We want to see:

1. All relevant government campaigns, particularly those aimed at changing parental or family behaviour, including a strategy for reaching and influencing grandparents.

2. A campaign to promote forthcoming age discrimination legislation, to raise awareness and to promote a culture of respect for older and younger people.

3. Children’s centres become family centres with a particular focus on contact between the generations.

4. Community cohesion initiatives include a focus on the role of the wider family.

The forthcoming statutory duty on public bodies to promote equality, including on grounds of age will mean that local authorities and other service providers will have to take steps to address the effects of age discrimination within their communities. Ageism is one of the most pernicious forms of discrimination. Without resource to promote the new legislation and to raise awareness we are unlikely to realise the cultural change that is needed. This is important for both young and old alike.
A recent Grandparents Plus YouGov poll asked parents of children under 18 who they would most trust to look after the welfare of their child if they were ever unable to care for them themselves. Their own mum or dad came top at 65%, closely followed by other family at 56% and friends at 27%. This was consistent across all ages, although significantly higher for parents aged 18-34 with three out of four (74%) preferring grandparents. Almost no one (1%) opted for care to be provided by children’s services. Yet the evidence shows that where children’s services place children into foster care only 16% are with family and friends carers. The rest are placed into non-relative foster care. Here we explore the reasons for that, we consider the benefits of family and friends care and suggest ways in which grandparents and other carers could be better supported.

What is family and friends (“kinship”) care?
It is thought that there are 200,000 grandparents in the UK caring for their grandchildren full-time. The term ‘kinship carer’ covers a wide range of relationships to the child but grandparents, particularly grandmothers, followed by aunts and uncles on the maternal side are the main carers. There are a number of different care arrangements that can be made.
Private fostering
This is where a parent makes a private agreement with another adult, usually a family member, to care for their child. Often local authorities are unaware of these arrangements although legally parents are obliged to inform them if the care lasts more than 28 days. There is a concern about private arrangements of which local authorities remain unaware as there is no way of determining whether or not they are in fact in children’s best interests.

Family and friends care
This is the care of a looked after child within the extended family or social network. This applies to any arrangement in which a child is cared for full-time by family or friends but they are not recognised by the local authority as foster carers. This arrangement is quite common but usually does not trigger any financial support for the carer.

Family and friends foster care
This indicates the involvement of children’s services. The child is being cared for by family or friends who have been recognised by the local authority as foster carers. As a result the carer should receive financial support. However, practice varies widely between local authorities. A survey of local authorities in 2003 found that less than half had specific guidelines on kinship care. The confusion means that lawyers are increasingly succeeding in challenging local authority practice.

Why do family and friends carers step in?
There are a number of different circumstances in which grandparents and other carers step in, for example, parental alcohol and substance misuse, death or illness, domestic violence or imprisonment. We explore three main causes here.

Alcohol and substance misuse
200,000 – 300,000 children in England and Wales have at least one parent with a serious drug problem. 1.3 million children in the UK are affected by parental alcohol problems. Only 37% of fathers and 64% of mothers who misuse drugs still live with their children. One of the biggest causes of parents being unable to care for their children is parental alcohol and substance abuse. Farmer and Moyers found that 60% of the children who were cared for by family and friends had been exposed to alcohol and substance misuse. Others experience domestic violence, parental imprisonment, illness and bereavement or a combination of these things. By the time that grandparents or other family members take over the care of children they often display emotional and behavioural difficulties at a significantly higher rate than children in the general population, but similar to those children placed in non-relative foster care.

ACTION
Because alcohol and substance misuse is such a significant factor in many of these cases we want to see the welfare of children of problem substance users promoted across all drug and alcohol strategies at a national, regional and local level.

This means recognising the additional support that family and friends carers may need to educate children about the risks of alcohol and substance misuse when they may have already been significantly exposed to it and may perceive it to be “normal”.

Imprisonment
Government research has found that maintaining family contact has a significant impact on the successful resettlement of, and likelihood of
reoffending by ex-prisoners\(^5\). Prisoners who receive visits from their families are twice as likely to gain employment and three times more likely to have a home to go to when they are released. 7%\(^6\) of children will see a parent imprisoned during their school years and about 160,000\(^7\) children each year have a parent sent to custody. Grandparents play a significant role in caring for children when parents, particularly mothers, are imprisoned. The number of women in prison has more than doubled in recent years\(^8\). Women offenders tend to be imprisoned for relatively minor offences but the impact on the family is significant because of their role as main carer. Because there are only a small number of women prisons they are also more likely to be held some distance from their families, reducing the opportunities for regular visits. Without a grandparent or another family member top step in children will be taken into care. Currently information about children with a parent in prison is not reliably or routinely recorded, and children of prisoners are not treated as a potentially vulnerable group.

**Bereavement**

Winston’s Wish calculates that every 30 minutes, a child in the UK is bereaved of a parent\(^9\). It is estimated that at least 250,000 children and young people are growing up after the death of their mum or dad\(^8\). In the absence of a surviving parent many of these children will be cared for by grandparents or other family members. Their particular feelings of loss and bereavement will be compounded by the grandparent’s own loss as it may be their child who has died. Families in these situations need support and counselling. Grandparents need guidance to help them to support their grandchildren in an age appropriate way through this experience. Like other kinship carers, they will need financial support, particularly if the bereavement is sudden. These families may be unknown to children’s services but they will almost certainly be in touch with a GP, hospital or local school for example.

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**ACTION**

We want to see all relevant professionals equipped to direct families to any counselling and practical support that may be available to them.

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**kinship care – ten common experiences**

- Relationships change, grandparents become parents, things get complicated
- They share a sense of loss with the child they care for
- It is unclear who is in control – who has parental responsibility?
- They didn’t plan to become kinship carers
- They do not fit in to the fostering and adoption system
- They receive little or no information
- They receive little or no money
- They receive little or no advice and support
- Their own lives, health, income and well-being are affected
- They don’t feel they have a choice

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**What does the law say about kinship care?**

The Children Act (1989) prioritises family and friends placements, directing that when a child is looked after away from home the local authority “shall make arrangements enabling him to live with a relative, friend, or other person connected with him unless that would not be reasonably practical or consistent with his welfare”.

This requirement is then reinforced by guidance which stipulates that “if young people cannot remain at home, placement with relatives or friends should be explored before other forms of placement are considered”.

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16% of children in local authority foster care are living with family or friends care
Despite this clear direction, the evidence suggests that family and friends care is not being used to the degree that it could and should. Farmer and Moyers found that only 4% of placements were instigated by social workers. The same study found that in almost 6 out of 10 (57%) cases where stranger placements were used, family and friends care was not even considered. Latest DCSF data indicates that 16% of children in local authority foster care are living with family and friends carers.

The Children and Young Person’s Act (2008) reasserts the role of kinship care in an attempt to achieve what the Children Act 1989 did not. Much will depend on the clarity of the guidance accompanying the legislation, but after 20 years of legislation with limited effect, there must be other barriers getting in the way.

**What are the barriers?**

**Age discrimination**

Grandparents in our grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network routinely claim that they are told by social workers that they are “too old” to care for their grandchild. Currently there is nothing illegal about this form of discrimination. A child may have experienced considerable loss or disruption in their lives so professionals sometimes conclude that the risk of losing a grandparent would be more disruptive to the child than placing them into non-relative foster care. But they may be basing their decision on a stereotype of what they believe an older person may or may not be capable of. Even if grandparents have health problems it does not necessarily mean they are incapable of caring for their grandchild. Part of the process of placing children would include planning for the child in the event of the serious illness or death of the kin carer. Additionally, this assessment fails to recognise that removing children from or failing to place them in the care of those who know them and with whom they may have an established relationship is also a form of loss.

New legislation in the forthcoming equality bill is expected to outlaw age discrimination in goods facilities and services.

**ACTION**

*We want to see children’s services covered by this new law to ensure that grandparents can challenge these decisions.*

**A question of judgement**

Deciding to place a child into the care of family and friends requires careful consideration of the circumstances and the evidence including the risk to the child. We know from high profile cases such as Victoria Climbié that relatives can and do abuse children. These judgements are not easy ones to make and require considerable professional expertise. In many ways placing a child into non-relative foster care is regarded as the “safer” option, despite all the evidence which shows the negative impact it has on a child’s life chances. It is also a way of professionals avoiding the need for a thorough and lengthy assessment. Yet we know that looked after children are far less likely than other children to achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs (12% compared to 59% for all children), they are also more likely to have a mental health disorder. 30% of care leavers aged 19 are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Social workers’ judgement can be clouded by the stigma that attaches itself to a family. If a parent has a poor or abusive relationship with their child then the assumption is that must be the fault of the grandparent, so they cannot be suitable carers. Professionals can also be steered away from kinship care simply because the impression they have of the family may be driven by the parent’s own poor relationship with the grandparent. It is important therefore that social workers do not form a view of the family without speaking to family members.

Family group conferencing has proven to be a useful way of considering the options for family and friends care either before or soon after a child is taken into local authority care. This is where social workers bring interested parties, including the extended family, together to discuss the welfare of the child and discuss his/her future.
ACTION
We want local authorities to give all families access to family group conferencing either before or, in emergency situations, immediately after a child is taken into care.

This would almost certainly result in an increase in family and friends placements.

If parents are found to be abusing the child, or to have a drug problem then social workers may conclude that grandparents in turn must be the cause of the problem rather than the solution. Yet there is evidence\(^ 5.19\) to challenge this. Even in circumstances where the grandparent’s relationship with the parent may have been extremely problematic they can still provide suitable care for their grandchild.

Grandparents Plus believes that we need to equip social workers to make those difficult judgements and support the profession to develop a confident approach to kinship care. The collective professional knock to their self-esteem as a result of the reporting of the baby P case is not in children’s best interests because we need them to be able to exercise those difficult judgements.

Because of the disproportionate amount of time social workers spend on paperwork and processes they are unable to carry out the kind of complex family work demanded by kinship care.

**Inappropriate assessments**

It is likely that a family and friends carer may not “fit” the profile of an acceptable foster placement. They may smoke, or their house may be too small. They may have a long-term health condition or may lack the skills to parent a child with significant behavioural problems. By assessing kinship carers in the same way as non-relative foster carers social workers may deem them to be unsuitable.

While in turn grandparents and family members may be offended by the fact that they are being treated as if they had no relationship with the child. But this is because the assessment they are using is inappropriate for family and friends carers. It is like fitting a square peg into a round hole.

**ACTION**
We want to see every local authority develop a tailored kinship care assessment that recognises that this form of care is qualitatively different from stranger foster care.

**Case study**
**Hampshire County Council Kinship Care Project**

Hampshire County Council runs a dedicated kinship care project which works with family and friends carers who are not registered as foster carers. The children are those who need to live away from home and who are assessed as Children in Need (under the Children Act Section 17). Family Group Conferences are used to make plans for the child whilst grandparents or other close relatives take on the care of the child. Parents retain parental responsibility whilst planning with their relatives for the care of the child. The child does not need to come into the care system. Kinship carers are then offered a means-tested weekly kinship allowance. They receive one to one support from a kinship care support worker and have access to support groups. The carers’ support needs are assessed. They have access to parenting support programmes, training and information days and access to the fostering services core training.
Inappropriate conduct
Grandparents regularly tell us that they feel pressurised and even threatened by social workers to take children in to their care. At a Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network meeting in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire in February 2009, a common experience of the grandparents in the room was being told that their grandchild is “very adoptable”. In response to this grandparents often agree to take the child at a moment’s notice rather than place them into foster care amid fear that they could be put up for adoption. They are not told about the options available to them.

ACTION
This kind of bullying behaviour is completely unacceptable and strongly highlights the need for kinship care training. We want to see an immediate end to this practice.

What are the options for family and friends carers?
A residence order applies until the child is 16 but does not usually bring with it additional financial support for family and friends carers. Parental responsibility remains with the parents.

A special guardianship order lasts until the child is 18 unless it is revoked by the court. The special guardian has parental responsibility and can make all decisions about the child. Special guardians are entitled to claim means tested benefits and also to receive child benefit. They can also claim assistance with the cost of supporting contact with the child’s parents and also services support for the child and themselves.

An adoption order transfers parental responsibility to the child’s adoptive family and is not revocable.

What are the benefits of family and friends care?
This is a complex picture but the evidence does point to some tangible benefits of family and friends care for children.

Attachment and placement stability
Children placed into family and friends care are more likely to feel secure, happy and integrated into the family than those placed into non-relative foster care. Many of the carers have strong ties with the children. One study found that they were twice as likely to be highly committed to the child as stranger foster-carers. Placements also tend to last longer and are more stable.

Maintaining relationships
By remaining within their extended family children are more likely to retain existing links with family and friends, to maintain their own culture and to stay in the same area or the same school. They are also more likely to remain with their siblings and maintain contact with at least one parent. If for some reason the placement breaks down then children are more likely to move to another relative, sustaining their relationships and minimising disruption.

Quality of care
Evidence here is mixed. Farmer and Moyers found that family and friends carers were more likely to have poor parenting skills and substantially more of them than non-relative foster carers were struggling to cope. Despite this the vast majority of placements were judged to be positive for the child (73%) or adequate (14%). Hunt found that only one in 5 (20%) of kinship placements raised any major issues.

Child well-being
Despite receiving less support than children living with non-relative foster carers children living in kinship care appear to do at least as well, with some research suggesting that they do better. Hunt’s research found that almost half (47%) of the children in family and friends placements were doing relatively well with only one in 5 (19%) having problems with more than two measures. However there have been no longitudinal studies comparing outcomes for children in family and friends care with those in non-relative foster care.
As a priority we would like to see the Department for Children Schools and Families invest in improving the evidence base on kinship care.

What do family and friends carers need?

Recognition
Kinship care is an essential part of the framework of care and support. But it is a different form of care to non-relative foster care and it should be recognised as such and given its own status.

Financial support
Farmer and Moyers found evidence of financial hardship in three out of four (75%) cases5.24. Family and friends carers often find that they receive no financial support for the children they care for, despite stepping in at short notice to provide full-time care. Often grandparents report that they thought they would get financial help but then received nothing. In many cases local authorities children’s services will only provide financial assistance if they have assessed the carer as a family and friends foster carer. Less formal arrangements do not qualify for any help.

In our YouGov5.25 poll we asked the general public whether grandparents and other family members who step in to care for a child for more than 28 days should be entitled to financial help from the state with the cost. Eight out of 10 people agreed, over a third (36%) strongly agreed.

As well as a need for ongoing support, there are considerable immediate financial costs associated with taking on the care of a child, such as buying a bed, clothing or other personal items. Yet kinship carers cannot claim any assistance with these costs.

Grandparents or family members who want to obtain a legal order to safeguard a child do not qualify for legal aid, and so have to meet the cost themselves. We believe this is unacceptable and want to see grandparents and other family carers given access to public funding in these circumstances.

ACTION
We believe the lack of financial support for families in these situations is unacceptable. We want to see:

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children raised by grandparents and other family members treated as children in need to ensure that they have all necessary support, including financial support.

family and friends who are raising a child who cannot live with their parents for more than 28 days entitled to a national allowance.

family and friends carers eligible for grants to help with one off costs.

family and friends carers qualify for legal aid to apply for a legal order to safeguard a child.

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Advice and information
It is left to voluntary sector advice services to fill the information gap for family and friends carers. The legal and benefits system is extremely complicated and people need help to deal with it, particularly at a time (such as the death of their own child or their alcohol or substance misuse) when they may be experiencing considerable stress and distress themselves. Local authorities should be required to provide information and advice to family and friends carers, including informing them of their options and their rights when faced with the choice of stepping in to provide care for a child.

Practical help
Family and friends carers often need help to deal with child behavioural problems that children may have. Yet they receive none of the training that foster carers receive because they are not foster carers. Similarly they are not targeted by parenting initiatives because they are not parents, so they may lack the parenting skills required to help a child with their homework or to combat bullying at school. By treating the children they care for as children in need we would begin to address this by triggering practical and financial support.

Good quality respite care would also be welcome. Family and friends carers need regular breaks so that they can provide the ongoing care that the child needs. But respite care is rarely available to them.

It would also be welcome for them to have access to services such as counselling to cope with emotional and psychological issues for them and for the child together with mediation to handle any conflict situations that may arise, for example with one or more parents.

Someone they can trust
Anecdotal evidence from our Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network suggests that trust in social workers is low. At the same time there is a considerable need for an advocate, someone they can trust to speak for them within children’s services and also to liaise with other service providers on their behalf. There is clearly a role for kinship care workers who are not necessarily part of the adoption and fostering service and who understand and value kinship care.

ACTION
We want to see:
Access to practical advice and support for family and friends carers to help them deal with a child’s behavioural, emotional and educational needs.

Dedicated kinship support services such as facilitated group work, advocacy and facilitated group support in every local authority area.

Parenting initiatives such as Parent Know How targeting grandparents.

Good quality respite care for grandparents and family members who are caring for a child in the absence of parents.

Access to counselling and mediation services when they need it.

Someone they can trust as an advocate within children’s services.
Network and groups

Grandparents Plus has been funded by the Big Lottery Fund to co-ordinate a network of grandparents and extended family members raising their grandchildren. The GRG Network brings together grandparents to give them a voice, to share experiences, to find solutions and to tell government, children’s services, the NHS, drug and alcohol agencies and others what needs to change.

We work with many support groups across the country to reach as many grandparents as possible, organising events together and providing a larger network for smaller groups to join. A recent event, held in Nottinghamshire, was organised with local charity Hetty’s who support the family and friends of drug and alcohol users.

Most children in foster care will return to their families

Help when a child returns home

Most children in either family and friends care or non-relative foster care eventually return to their families. This process receives little or no support, yet the problems that caused the child to go into care in the first place may return, or may have never gone away. We believe that it is unrealistic to expect families to function in a sustainable way without supporting the process of the child returning home both in the days and weeks immediately afterwards and over the months that follow.

ACTION

We want to see local authorities placed under a duty to provide support if and when a child returns to their families after a period of time in non-relative foster care or the care of other family and friends.

Case study

Grandparent raising grandchildren

“My daughter killed herself nine years ago; her partner had died of a drug overdose and she did not wish to live without him. She arranged her death so that her two children, a girl of seven and a boy of just one year, were staying with me. My daughter was devoted to her children and they to her and I still miss and think of her every day.

“There was never any question of the children not staying with me and initially social services agreed to contribute towards my grandson’s nursery costs as I was working. But the contributions didn’t last long and ceased well before he started school. At no time did they offer practical help, nor did I expect it.

“I now work part-time and receive work and tax credit and, after much negotiating, £50 a week from social services which could stop at any time. The social worker told me I was the only grandparent who had asked for money.

“After such a traumatic start I am pleased at the way the children have turned out. We are happy together and I hope to live long enough to see them into adulthood. However, the fact remains that their lives have been severely blighted and mine is hardly as I had imagined.”
Summary:

Family and friends carers often receive little or no help and have uncertain status. It is time to give them and the children they care for the support they need.

We want to see:

1. The welfare of children of problem substance users promoted across all drug and alcohol strategies at a national, regional and local level.

2. All relevant professionals equipped to direct families to counselling and practical support that may be available to them.

3. The children raised by grandparents and other family members treated as children in need to ensure that they have all necessary support, including financial support.

4. Family and friends who are raising a child who cannot live with their parents for more than 28 days entitled to a national allowance.

5. Family and friends carers eligible for grants to help with one-off costs.

6. Family and friends carers who qualify for legal aid if they need to apply for a legal order to safeguard a child.

7. All social work courses to include training on kinship care.

8. Access to practical advice and support for family and friends carers to help them deal with a child’s behavioural, emotional and educational needs.

9. Dedicated kinship support services such as facilitated group work, advocacy and facilitated group support in every local authority area.

10. Children’s services covered by age discrimination legislation to ensure that grandparents can challenge the decisions made.

11. The Department for Children Schools and Families invest in improving the evidence base on kinship care.

In particular local authorities:

12. Required to provide information and advice to family and friends carers, including informing them of their rights and all the options open to them when faced with the choice of stepping in to provide care for a child.

13. Fully implement the Children and Young Person’s Act 2008, following both the spirit and the letter of the law.

14. Give all families access to family group conferencing either before or, in emergency situations, immediately after a child is taken into care.

15. Ensure that professionals are supported by regular opportunities for high-quality kinship care training at both operational and managerial levels.

16. Placed under a duty to provide support for the return of children to their families after a period of time in non-relative foster care or the care of family and friends.

17. Provide good quality respite care for grandparents and family members who are caring for a child in the absence of parents.

18. Ensure access to counselling and mediation services when family and friends carers need it.
A familiar yet unknown lifestage
Families may be changing but nevertheless we still define ourselves in terms of our relationships to others. One international survey found that when asked who they are two thirds of people around the world say “my family”\(^6.1\). At different stages in her life the same woman can be a wife, a single parent, a partner, a mother, a sister, a grandmother. Each represents a step on a life-stage, a development in our lives. There is much written about becoming a mother, and to a lesser (but growing) extent, becoming a father. But little attention has been paid to the grandparental life stage. What impact does becoming a grandparent have on your attitudes and decisions? There is little research available to answer that question. A recent British Social Attitudes (BSA) analysis\(^6.2\) points towards the need for further work. It makes the simple but important point that parents do not stop being parents when their children reach the age of 18. They continue to define themselves as parents. 86% of the over 65s are parents. 14% are childless. This study finds that parenthood does appear to have some effects on people’s attitudes that are not attributable to age and class. Their children may have left home some time ago, but their parental role (and for many we can read grandparental relationship) will continue to be an important defining influence for them.

Further research is needed here. Unless we fully understand the parental/grandparental life stage we will continue to miss how this determines attitudes, behaviour and choices.

You don’t stop being a parent just because your child turns 18
Is a rights-based approach the way forward?
The right to family life


Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance…. 

There are clearly competing and potentially conflicting rights for children, parents and grandparents. Grandparents Plus believes that our primary focus should be on the welfare and rights of the child. The assertion of any adult rights must, therefore, be exercised in a way that is consistent with this. We believe there are three principles which should be met. We must:

• Promote the welfare of the child
• Reduce and manage conflict wherever possible
• Support a child’s family relationships

Recent Gingerbread research found that seven out of 10 families there is some contact between the child and the non-resident parent. But in three of 10 cases contact is absent altogether. We know that nine out of 10 non-resident parents are male. It is overwhelmingly the paternal grandparents who lose out on contact with grandchildren when parents separate. After separation the contribution that maternal grandparents make goes up, while paternal grandparents have the opposite experience. Before separation six out of 10 paternal grandparents report feeling very close to their grandchild but that drops to three out of 10 after separation.

Care and adoption proceedings

When neither parent is able to care for the child then care and adoption proceedings may follow. As the law stands grandparents have no right to be included in care and adoption proceedings and they are required to apply for leave for orders under the Children’s Act 1989. For many grandparents this legal process presents them with a significant cost, one that they may struggle to afford. Is it justifiable to treat grandparents in the same way as any other adult in this situation or should they be able to seek an order under the Children’s Act (1989) without first seeking leave to apply? The Government’s view is that the requirement to seek leave is in place in order to deter “vexatious” or “frivolous” applications but we believe this is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the motivations and actions of grandparents in these situations.

ACTION

We would like to see a review of the requirement that grandparents have to apply for leave for a residence or contact order.

1 million children are unable to see their grandparents because families have either separated or lost touch.

Family separation

1 million children are unable to see their grandparents because families have either separated or lost touch. This represents a significant loss to the child in terms of his or her family life, future support and personal and cultural identity as well as a huge loss to the grandparents.
Minimising conflict
It is generally accepted that conflict between adults is bad for children. A recent BSA survey showed that eight out of 10 (78%) adults believe it is conflict rather than separation that harms children. This would seem to be borne out by evidence suggesting that experience of conflict can be a significant determining factor for child outcomes. Children in intact families experiencing high levels of conflict do less well than children in single parent households.

Parents and children can often have very different perspectives on the same situation. In a survey teenagers and parents were both asked whether they agreed with the statement, “parents getting on well is one of the most important factors in raising happy children.” Seven in 10 of the teenagers agreed compared to just a third of the parents. We believe that after ensuring the safety of the child and resident parent (usually the mother) the primary focus should be on minimising family conflict. Despite a recent government announcement of a boost to funding for relationship services, these services are not free to families. We believe that if a minimum number of sessions were available free of charge this would encourage take up at an earlier stage in the relationship breakdown and could help to reduce conflict. Just as we prioritise our physical and mental wellbeing, so we should also prioritise the health of our family relationships.

Could more be done within existing law to ensure parents support a child’s wider family relationships?
When couples with children are divorcing they complete a Statement of Arrangements form, setting out where and with whom the children will be living and what the contact arrangements with the non-resident parent will be. It includes details of the child’s childcare arrangements, their school and any special educational needs they may have as well as details about other children in the family. But there is no reference to relationships with other people, including grandparents and the wider family, who may be important to the child.

This stage in the divorce process could become an opportunity for parents to be required to state who in their child’s life is particularly important to them and what they will do as parents to support those relationships. This information could then be shared with those named in the form who in turn would be able to return to the court if either parent failed to facilitate the contact as they suggested. It does not go as far as to introduce grandparental rights but this would force parents to at least consider the child’s wider relationships and would emphasise that it is their responsibility as parents to support those relationships if they are in their child’s best interests.

Divorce is such a painful and stressful experience that parents may not deliberately want to exclude grandparents and other family members but may struggle to think beyond their own immediate circumstances. This modest step would at least help them to do that.

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**ACTION**
We want to see every family who experiences relationship breakdown entitled to three free sessions of relationship support, counselling or mediation.

**ACTION**
We want to see the Statement of Arrangements for children include what steps parents will undertake to support a child’s relationships with their grandparents and other important people in the child’s life.
Is a presumption of contact the way forward?
This would mean that contact with fathers and potentially, grandparents and other family members would be presumed to be in the child’s best interests unless a case had been made to state otherwise. However, when one considers how this could apply to parents, it could be problematic and potentially in conflict with the welfare of the child as set out in the 1989 Children Act. Those cases which go to court tend to be the most difficult ones and involve higher levels of conflict. They also tend to have a disproportionately high rate (22%) of allegations of domestic violence. Limited evidence from a system of presumed contact in Australia also suggests that it results in more litigation not less. For these reasons we believe that a presumption of contact is not the answer.

Should grandparents be told of any adoption proceedings?
The child’s right to family life would suggest that grandparents should be informed of any adoption proceedings, to at least give them the opportunity to apply to care for the child themselves. A recent legal case resulted in a court deciding that a mother had the right to put her child up for adoption without notifying the father or the grandparents. This is because parental responsibility lies solely with mothers unless she is married to the child’s father. These are difficult cases and many factors have to be considered, including the welfare of the mother, but we believe it is in the child’s best interest to at least give the grandparents the opportunity to be considered as potential carers for the child alongside any prospective adopter.

Gender, age discrimination and stereotypes
Evidence from France points to grandfathers playing a more active role than they have done previously, suggesting that they may be liberated by their grandparental role in a way that they were unable to be when they were fathers. The gender divide was much starker 30 or 40 years ago. A father in the 1950s or 1960s would not have been at the birth of their children, would have worked long hours and may not have spent much time playing or interacting with them. Anecdotal evidence suggests that as grandfathers they experience a second chance to fulfil a fatherly role that they were unable to achieve the first time around.

Today’s fathers, on the other hand, are more involved than ever. Over nine out of 10 dads take time off around the birth of their child. Between 1975 and 1997 dad’s care of infants and young children increased by 800%. A Fatherhood Institute survey found that eight out of 10 women and six out of 10 men agreed that fathers were as good as mothers at caring for children. It will be interesting to see what kind of grandfathers these dads become in the years ahead.

“the village raises the child”
The role of the matriarch in certain societies is still very powerful, as is the expectation that the extended family and the community share the task of bringing up the next generation. In these cultures age commands respect and is not regarded as weakness. In many Indian and Pakistani families for example, the extended family rather than the nuclear model is the norm. So the expectation may be that a couple would live with one set of parents, usually the paternal grandparents. In the UK over one in 4 Indian families live with their children’s paternal grandparents. For black Caribbean families one in 10 live with their maternal grandparents. Three generations in one household is therefore not uncommon.
In the United States at 5.5% the proportion of households where grandparents are raising grandchildren is significantly higher than in Britain where it is 2%.\textsuperscript{6,19}

It is perhaps stating the obvious to say that grandparents are as diverse as families. But it is still the case that maternal grandmothers play a particularly active role in family life and the care of children. Because they are defined in terms of their relationship not only with their grandchild but with their child (i.e. the parent), we fail to consider that they have a choice about the role they play as grandparent, in a way which doesn’t apply to the parental role.

It is this combination of age and gender stereotyping which renders grandmothers invisible in policy terms. We simply take their contribution for granted. After all, if they didn’t look after their grandchildren, what else would they do? Well, we may be about to find out. Evidence suggests that the baby boomer generation may not be so ready and willing to fill the shoes of today’s grandparents. Women in their 50s and 60s today will almost certainly have spent more of their lives working than their mothers. They are the consumer generation who have also benefited from the creation of the welfare state. Defined by characteristics of individualism and social activism and relatively well off compared to previous generations of older people, baby boomers expect to continue to live life to the full and enjoy their retirement. They value their independence and may well be resistant to providing the informal care that their own mothers have provided.

Today’s parents will be working until they are 70 or more and so will probably savour their retirement when it eventually comes. They are also more likely than their mothers and fathers to be carrying considerable burden of personal debt and will be less well prepared for their retirement, so this generation may find that they have to work rather than care.

### Living with grandparents by baby’s ethnic group

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Dex and Joshi Millennium Cohort Study 2004

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1 in 4

Indian families live with paternal grandparents

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Significantly more could be done to understand the grandparental lifestage. We need to go further to support and recognise the role of grandparents and the extended family, particularly where families split up.

We want to see:

1. further research into the grandparental lifestage.

2. every family who experiences relationship breakdown entitled to three free sessions of relationship support, counselling or mediation.

3. a review of the requirement that grandparents have to apply for leave for a residence or contact order.

4. the Statement of Arrangements for children to include what steps parents will undertake to support a child’s relationships with their grandparents and other important people in the child’s life.

5. grandparents notified of any care and adoption proceedings unless it can be demonstrated that this would not be in the interests of the child or the welfare of the parent with care.

Policy makers and service providers have to recognise that the significant contribution that grandparents make today, particularly the provision of informal childcare, may not be there to the same degree in future generations. It is likely that formal childcare provision will need to grow to fill this gap. A greater understanding of the grandparental lifestage both now and in the future would help us prepare for that.
The growth of “beanpole” four and five generation families, combined with more complex and fragmented family structures and a significant and growing role for grandparents requires us to look again at how the family is providing care for itself and to reconsider the wider intergenerational contract. In particular we consider this in the context of the current debate about social care reform.

We have already begun to explore (in chapter 2 above) the idea of rewarding care with care. This would ensure that the care that a grandparent provides during their lifetime counts towards the care that they may need themselves later in life. Of course this could also be extended to include other groups of carers such as those caring for disabled relatives. This reciprocity is not a new concept. In fact it is what families themselves have been doing for centuries.

The challenge is twofold:

Should the state support and facilitate that family reciprocity, and if so how?

Should the state replicate that reciprocity in the wider intergenerational contract?
Reciprocity – what does it mean?
The reasons why one person cares for another are both personal and practical. It may also be a very complex relationship. The concept of a duty of care for someone who may have in turn provided care for us or our children, is not an unfamiliar one but it is one that younger generations may find less acceptable and also something that with other competing pressures, they simply cannot fulfil. We have already seen that grandparents enjoy and welcome their grandparental role when they have a considerable degree of control over it. That is, they can say “no”. It would be unacceptable therefore for there to be any expectation or compulsion on any family member, other than a parent to a child, to provide care for another. But on the other hand, as we have suggested in this report, there is more that could be done to recognise, value and support those caring relationships and so facilitate that reciprocity. There are also significant benefits for families, society and the economy in doing so.

Enhancing the wellbeing of older people and supporting family life
The Government has prioritised the need to personalise social care. This is very welcome because all too often we focus on the care need, not the person who needs care. But we cannot successfully personalise care unless we recognise the social capital in our relationships. That is, family matters and not only because of the care they provide. There is a welcome emphasis on the role of family and informal carers in the Government’s National Dementia Strategy. But this is almost entirely in the form of the care they provide rather than understanding the intrinsic value of relationships for the wellbeing of the person with dementia. Evidence shows that reducing the isolation of older people is fundamental to their wellbeing and in turn affects their likelihood of needing medical or service interventions.

Grandparents Plus believes that we should consider older people in terms of the lifestage experiences, that is as parents, grandparents or great grandparents instead of simply seeing them as older people. Contact between older people, their families and carers is fundamental to the way care is shaped and delivered. Many users of the care system will be grandparents. Contact with their families may well be in the form of informal care provided to them but it may also be simply maintaining “normal” family visits. Most older people are cared for in their own homes but for 420,000 older people this is not the case and they are cared for in care homes. When
an older person goes into a care home they leave behind them their personal and familiar surroundings. They may find that they have very limited space to accommodate personal items. They may also be confused and anxious about the experience of moving home which is known to be particularly traumatic for older people. In these circumstances contact with family members may be particularly valuable to their wellbeing. We believe that more could be done to support family contact by making care homes more accommodating and inviting for families, particularly those with young children.

**ACTION**
We want to see a play area or dedicated regular family time in every residential care home to reduce isolation of older people, encouraging families to visit regularly, support grandparental relationships and to make residential care more welcoming to children.

We also know that the turnover of care workers is considerable so older people find that the people caring for them may not know or understand them very well. So we believe that, where possible, this requires a greater role for family and friends.

For example they could be encouraged to help the older person produce a “life story” book to inform care workers about the person they are caring for including their needs and wishes, their interests and past experiences as well as their care needs.

However, this is no substitute for regular communication. It would also be helpful if care workers could take the time to talk to family members and find out more about the older person, the family’s concerns and wishes and the importance of their relationships for the older person’s wellbeing.

**ACTION**
As part of the personalisation agenda we want to see research into the experiences of family members, including children, who have regular contact with the social care system, so that it can be informed by their experiences to support the family and to improve the outcomes for the older person in need of care.

Reducing isolation also reduces the likelihood of needing medical or service interventions.
Summary:
Unless we count the caring contribution that grandparents make the intergenerational contract will be incomplete. In particular we should do more to facilitate and support family contact in the social care system and build on family intergenerational activity for community intergenerational practice.

We want to see:

1. further exploration of intergenerational reciprocity to establish how we could reward care with care to find appropriate alternative forms of recognition for grandparents’ caring contribution.

2. a play area or dedicated regular family time in every residential care home to reduce isolation of older people, encouraging families to visit regularly, support grandparental relationships and to make residential care more welcoming to children.

3. families and carers encouraged to help the older person produce a “life story” book to inform care workers about the person they are caring for including their needs and wishes, their interests and past experiences as well as their care needs.

4. research into the experiences of family members, including children, who have regular contact with the social care system, so that personalisation can be informed by their experiences to improve the experiences and outcomes for the older person in need of care.

5. Government investing in intergenerational practice across a number of policy areas including community cohesion and social care.
Grandparents and the wider family play a significant role in our lives. They support parents, care for children and help to shape our communities. If we stop to reflect on our own families we will almost certainly think beyond our parents, identifying people who are important to us or who have been influential figures in our family’s lives.

Grandparents Plus believes that we need to recognise, value and support the role of grandparents and the wider family. By doing so we will deliver fairer treatment for older people, improve outcomes for children and recognise and support the choices parents make. But importantly for policy makers and service providers, we will begin to connect with the reality of people’s family lives in a new way. Our failure to do so to date has largely been driven by a combination of age and gender stereotypes. The care that is still mostly provided by older women continues to be widely used and is usually taken for granted. But this also sits uncomfortably with us because as a society we do not like to see significant contributions from others going unvalued and unrewarded.

Families define who we are, whatever their structure. We retain that focus on the relationships that matter to us throughout our lives, and that includes when we need care ourselves. Personalisation in social care cannot be achieved unless we adopt an intergenerational approach and recognise and value family relationships. Intergenerational practice needs to be informed by family experiences.

This is an exciting time because this is an issue whose time has arrived. We want to shape a new chapter in family policy for one of the oldest parts of family life. By doing so we hope that we can help to improve the lives of children, parents, grandparents and other family members. But importantly also address some of the injustice and poverty experienced by family and friends carers who have stepped into the parental role full-time. It has to be wrong that something so fundamental to us is valued so little. We want to work with our partners to try to change that.
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