

Consultation response to the Green Paper “Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations”

Response on behalf of the West Midlands Regional Health Partnership and the Regional Social Inclusion Group.

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1. Introduction

Managing demographic change is vital if effective support structures and services are to be provided into the future, to cope with changing populations. The following response to the Green Paper, on behalf of the West Midlands Regional Health Partnership and the Regional Social Inclusion Group, highlights some of the areas and issues raised by the Green Paper that are of importance, based on the experience in the West Midlands. Many of the issues highlighted by the green paper including an ageing population, re-training updating skills, low fertility rates, integration of migrants, reconciling family care and paid work are issues currently being faced by the population of the West Midlands.

2. Demographic trends and managing their impact at European level

It is important that the discussion of demographic trends and managing their impact takes place at European level. Much of EU legislation can help prepare for or even mitigate the effects of a changing population. There is also a great impact on the population from migration, which would be difficult for individual countries to monitor in isolation. Some of the areas where European impact could be most effective are;

- Managing migration and integration
- Increasing flexibility and work options (this could be extended to all people regardless of whether they have children or dependents)
- Increased gender equality at work
- Improving the quality and desirability of jobs, including improving the working environment.
- Combating discrimination on grounds of age (young and older workers)
- Improving care needs and appropriate care

Whilst there are great advantages to European management of Demographic trends, ‘imposition’ of new rules, without adequate

information for why changes are necessary, adequate research, and most importantly, consultation with those people most likely to be affected, may not see the changes being as effective or used to their full advantage. Engagement with the appropriate organisations and individuals at all levels will be important in managing the urgent changes needed to mitigate the effects of the current predicted population changes.

3. The Challenge of a low birth rate

Reconciling family care and paid work must be addressed. Many people starting a career would be reluctant to then take a break to have children, which might mean taking a career break, affecting their potential to progress within their chosen field and problems of lower pensions that this can create, particularly for women. Greater investment in reliable and affordable care provision for the young, giving a sound base for people to be able to work and have children, would be a step forward.

Currently the cost of childcare might be prohibitive, especially for middle to lower paid workers. The HM Treasury report 'Choice for Parents, the best Start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare'¹ states that "many families still have difficulty finding childcare services that fit their circumstances and that adapt as children grow". Inclusion of all with family life and equality of opportunity are fundamental to creating a society where people are able to make choices about whether to have a family. There should be adequate flexibility and work options, which encourage people to have the choice of having a family. Improving the working environment, quality of jobs and health at work, to provide a more supportive and family-friendly environment is also important.

The cost of suitable housing provision is also an important aspect for people when making the decision to start a family. The West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy shows that the average house price (excluding detached dwellings) would have required a mortgage of up to 6 times average incomes in the North of the region and 9 times average incomes in the South and the West of the region.²

4. The possible contribution of immigration

Whilst immigration from outside of the EU could help to mitigate the effects of the falling population between now and 2025, it is not enough on its own to solve all the problems and should not be used as a substitute for economic reforms. Immigrants will

¹ Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: a Ten Year Strategy for Childcare, HM Treasury, December 2004

² West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy, 2005, WMRA

experience the same problems or different barriers to accessing the job market and housing market, which have already been stated as barriers to family life in the EU.

Admission to the EU must be managed effectively and most importantly, transparently with pro-active integration and equal opportunities. Supportive policies, allowing people better understanding of the healthcare, social and educational systems of the country they are entering, will ensure people can reach their full potential, which can only benefit the countries they are entering.

5. Better integration of young people

Discrimination on the grounds of age and occupational experience can leave young people with less job choices and having to take up lower paid jobs (the green paper refers to a net income of less than 60% of average). Acknowledging and valuing the role of part-time work and voluntary work in gaining valuable work experience should not be underestimated and should be formally recognised. The Russell Report³ refers to “the clearly expressed desire of young people to find meaningful ways of contributing to their communities”. Additionally, the barriers to integrating into economic life should be bridged. Young people need guidance and support to integrate into the working environment. Apprenticeships can help with this for example. There is also a need to value all jobs and skills, not just professional roles. Genuine incentives for young people entering into business and professions, whereby they can see a career path linked to skills training, may encourage more involvement with the process. Education has a role to play in helping to make the links to large employers, such as the NHS, ensuring that the courses and training are appropriate for the jobs that are available.

In the West Midlands, the Regional Assembly has a Youth seat from the UK Youth Parliament. Further attempts such as this should be made to integrate young people in the decision making process to ensure their needs are being considered in the planning process.

6. A global approach to the “working life cycle”

Organisation of work needs to be flexible to take into account the needs of all age groups. However it is important not to be divisive or discriminatory with workplace policies. People may have many and varied reason for wanting a more flexible

³ Russell Commission, ‘A National Framework for Youth Action and Engagement’, Executive summary, March 2005

working week, not just because they have children. Many businesses are not reliant on staff needing to be in the office and 'remote' and 'home-working' can knock hours of wasted time travelling and make workplaces more accessible for more rural communities. It is important that people are kept up to date with technological advances and improving workplace training to accommodate this makes good business sense and helps workers of all ages adapt more easily to change.

More concessions and support for businesses and organisations providing flexibility and part-time arrangements will help to offset any costs involved in setting up and running flexible arrangements. The benefits to the company derived from a healthy and more motivated workforce should be promoted, together with links to good occupational support services for businesses and their workers. Promoting a 'healthy' approach to work, including taking proper breaks and 'smarter working practices' rather than longer hours will help to redress the work-life balance. Policies encouraging people to work longer (more years) should be balanced with the appropriate support to enable people to do that. People of all ages need to feel valued in the workplace.

Additionally, basing pensions on final years salary can be a disincentive to carrying on in a post part-time, this might especially affect women who often have career breaks for children or work part time to fit around a caring role.

7. A new place for "elderly people"

A more flexible, gradual, approach to retirement is a sensible way forward. It might even contribute to the solidarity between older and younger people. People should not be forced to retire if they are still perfectly capable of carrying out their duties, nor should people be forced to carry on working where they clearly wish to retire. People will generally need an incentive to carry on working past retirement age and would need to be assured that their rights and entitlements will not be affected.

There appears to be no clear guidance or signposting to jobs for older people who may wish to work temporarily or part time and this would need to be addressed. Perhaps the 'health' benefits of a more active lifestyle could be promoted, with businesses such as leisure centres, normally associated with younger people, taking the lead in encouraging more older applicants for appropriate jobs.

Pensioner mobility between Member States brings in issues of social protection and health care. Where people make the choice to move, this should not be to the detriment of local populations, and careful controls through the planning processes of the member states needs to ensure this happens. However, people who have worked within the EU, should have their rights protected, irrespective of where they choose to live. In fact, barriers to such choice may in itself create social and healthcare problems.

The EU should be investing heavily in health promotion and prevention in order that people understand the need to keep active. Encouraging people to take the initiative and understand how they can help themselves is crucial. What are the effects for example of obesity within a young generation, on the potential for them to be economically active in the workplace to an older age as espoused by the Green Paper?

8. Solidarity with the very elderly

Care services and health services generally are already under strain from an ageing population and according to the DH National Service Framework for Older People⁴ “services sometimes fail to meet older peoples needs – sometimes by discriminating against them, by failing to treat them with dignity and respect”.

Including long-term care for the elderly in the coordination of national social protection policies is vital in order to be informed about and manage an ageing population’s needs. Research needs to be carried out on the likely needs of populations and resources will need to be co-ordinated accordingly. A real step-change will be needed in the level of service provision to cope with the increased demands on support services in this area. Better pay and recognition of the important role that care-workers play must be addressed. The role of the family in supporting elderly relatives is also important and should be valued and fully supported. Additionally, the needs and choices of the very elderly should be addressed in a participative way, with clearer guidelines available to people on their rights and choices.

New technologies are a valuable tool in helping people to remain independent in their own home for as long as possible and remote medical monitoring for example, allows services to be used more smartly.

⁴ National Service Framework for Older People, Executive Summary, DH, 2004

9. Conclusion: what should the European Union's role be?

The European Union are in an ideal position to promote exchanges and regular analysis of demographic change as well as its impact on societies. The Unions financial instruments, particularly the structural funds, should take account of demographic changes, by, for example, adding criteria around demography into the bidding processes. Decisions could be better informed and integration of younger and older people in the decision making process may contribute to a civil society.

Most importantly, changes to policy should happen with equality and integration as underpinning themes and policy change should be provided with the right support and incentives for people to make the changes and adjustments to their life patterns. Challenging pre-conceptions, especially in the workplace regarding peoples age and capability to carry out roles and accepting that people are experiencing life events such as graduation, first house and first child, later in their lives, will need to be accommodated in the work place. The Green paper espouses this but then starts to categorise people by age brackets, which could be divisive.

The role of the family in creating 'solidarity between the generations' should be valued and supported. The family role in caring for dependents should be acknowledged for its economic benefit and supported with a good infrastructure. However, this role should not be relied on or expected as it can create inequalities, especially for women, who often become the primary carers for children and elderly or sick relatives.

The role of regional partners and authorities should also be acknowledged with respect to the roles of the planning processes and the Regional Housing Strategies for example, in affecting and ensuring the structures are in place to prepare for demographic changes.

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