

Families Need Fathers

Keeping Children and Parents in Contact since 1974

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Green Paper on Demographic Change
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J-27 01/122
European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

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Dear Sir/Madam,

Regarding your consultation on the Green Paper on Demographic Change, I have pleasure in attaching the response from Families Need Fathers, a charitable organisation based in the UK.

We are happy to have had the opportunity to input in to your work, and hope there will be further opportunities for consultation.

We would be grateful if you would keep us informed of developments and put us on your mailing lists.

With best wishes

Nadja Singh

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**FNF RESPONSE TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S GREEN PAPER
"CONFRONTING DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE: A NEW SOLIDARITY
BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS"**

1. This is the response of the UK charity 'Families Need Fathers' (FNF) to the Commission's Green Paper "Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations" (COM(2005) 94 final).

Families Need Fathers

2. Families Need Fathers (FNF) is a registered charity providing information on shared parenting issues arising from family breakdown and support to divorced and separated parents, irrespective of gender or marital status. Our primary concern is the maintenance of the child's relationship with both parents. We believe that all parents should be treated equally. Research shows that children thrive best with two caring parents, yet it is clear that prevailing attitudes towards shared parenting after separation or divorce are marginalising non-resident parents - almost always fathers - on an alarming scale.
3. In response to this need, Families Need Fathers was founded in May 1974 and became a registered charity in 1979. FNF provides information through its publications and through its Internet website. Personal support is provided by a national network of volunteers who act as telephone contacts and local organisers, and regular branch meetings are held nationwide. Building on the ethos of self-help, members can also receive advice and support through on-line self-help and chat forums. As well as this, the charity runs parenting workshops that address issues of parenting after separation. As a self-help society, FNF operates the largest network of support and encouragement to separating and separated parents at what is, for most, an emotionally distressing period. As a campaigning charity, FNF is widely recognised as the most authoritative representative of non-resident parents. FNF seeks to address the problems faced by non-resident parents, and to influence public opinion by raising awareness of the inadequacy of the current family justice system and its effect upon divided families, both parents and children alike. Families Need Fathers remains the only organisation offering charitable support specifically aimed at parents who do not live with their children all the time. Its membership is made up of a broad cross-section of all people affected by family breakdown, particularly fathers, but including grandparents, broader family members and second partners. It welcomes parents of either sex and has a growing number of mothers as members.

The Green Paper

4. FNF agrees with the Commission that a discussion of demographic trends and managing their impact should take place at European level. (Question on page 4) Although different Member States have different demographic prospects in the short and medium term, we believe that there are common themes faced which make it helpful to share experience and issues and discuss how to address them. Solutions may be best implemented at national or European level, but first we need to have the debate.
5. The Green Paper asks what the objectives of such a debate should be and what policy areas are concerned. (Also p 4). We believe that the debate should promote a better understanding of how demography impacts on European economies and societies. This means that the debate must be very wide ranging. The Green Paper mentions a number of important policy areas, such as immigration and the financing of old age. These all deserve attention.
6. The main point we wish to make in our submission is that one area is only briefly alluded to in the Green Paper, but deserves much greater attention in the debate which we hope the Green Paper will stimulate: the consequences of marital breakdown and in particular the role of fathers after separation or divorce.
7. There can be no doubt that marital breakdown is now important and growing in Europe. The following themes have been identified by academic research¹:
 - Retreat of marriage: There were 8 marriages per 1000 population in 1970, there are 5 in 1999.
 - Later marriage: Mean marriage age was 26 for men and 23 for women (1980), it increased to 30 for men and 28 for women (1999).
 - Divorce rates are increasing: 14% from the marriage cohort 1960 ended in divorce, 28% from the cohort 1980 will end in divorce (estimate).
 - Fertility decline: Period fertility (total fertility rate, TFR) was at 1.82 in 1980, it is down to 1.45 in 1999.
 - Later childbearing: A woman's mean age at first birth was 27 in 1980, it is 29 in 1999.

¹ See Family change and family patterns in Europe Josef Bruderl, University of Mannheim September 2003, available at <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/projects/changeequal/papers.asp?selbut=2> He draws on Commission and other data. EU means EU-15 here.

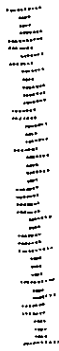
- Cohabitation on the rise: There are no official data on this trend, but surveys show a clear increase in those choosing cohabitation as their first partnership arrangement. And:
 - Extramarital births on the rise: The percentage was 10% of all births in 1980, it increased to 27% in 1999.
8. There is no doubt room for much further research on the causal links between marital breakdown and demographic trends. But from FNF's practical experience we believe that there are strong links. The negative experiences associated with marital breakdown are very likely to impact on attitudes to childbirth: for parents who separate or divorce, for their children and others in their social networks who observe or share in the experience. It is not a simple matter of marital breakdown making having children less attractive, but we do believe that one impacts on the other, in a variety of ways that will in turn impact on demographic trends.
 9. In the last couple of decades, at least in the UK, social policy and jurisprudence has tended to focus on the need to keep children with their mothers following marital breakdown. Recently there are signs that, as FNF has long campaigned for, the authorities are recognising that a much more balanced approach is needed, particularly in the interests of children. The role of fathers in bringing up children in these often difficult circumstances needs to be given appropriate recognition. Both parents have a role to play in offering children the best life chances, and social policy and the law needs to recognise that.
 10. Correspondingly, we believe that the debate on Europe's demography needs to take into account the impact of marital breakdown and in particular the role of fathers in ensuring that children are given the best possible start in life when marriages and relationships fail. We believe that would have a general beneficial effect on attitudes to starting families. At a minimum, that is an hypothesis that deserves to be tested.

Demography, marital breakdown and the role of fathers: Themes for debate and future research

11. The skein of effects on demographic trends would be very complex and require further research. So here we only sketch some possible lines of enquiry.
12. First, the different kinds of family need to be considered. Referring back to the data quoted above, does it matter in demographic terms that cohabitation is on the increase? Are there differences in these terms between Member States where divorce is higher or lower? The term 'single parent family', used in the Green Paper, needs to be treated with caution. Only one parent is in the same home as the children. But the other parent is somewhere, on a spectrum ranging

from regular constructive contact to having lost touch with his (or, much less frequently, her) children altogether. What are the demographic consequences? We agree with the Green Paper that such families too often suffer poverty, but to what extent does public policy bring that about?

13. Secondly, what is the impact of different social policies? Looking at the broad alternatives of regimes that are 'mother-focused', 'father-focused' or, as FNF prefers, balanced, what is the demographic record associated with each kind of regime?
14. And what are the links between family policy and other policies impacted by demographic change? To mention a policy area rightly highlighted by the Green Paper, how do different family policies relate to the need to maintain and improve pension provision throughout the Union? FNF believes that family policies that strengthen relationships between children and both parents following marital breakdown will in turn strengthen the social solidarity that is needed to ensure that children help support their parents in old age. Correspondingly, policies which militate against this goal – in the UK and elsewhere, by discouraging contact between fathers and children, will produce groups in old age who are socially isolated and financially excluded. In short, shared parenting will have a positive impact on pensions provision, and indeed in other policy areas. Sweden is an excellent model here. The lack of shared parenting can only be harmful in social terms, and that may well have demographic effects.
15. There are many views about what kind of society would come about if shared parenting were the norm. That should be part of the debate the Commission has launched. We would only say at this stage that there is abundant evidence from all over Europe that we will have to live in societies with many different family models. The aim of policy should be to help make that a positive experience. We see no prospect of a reduction in this diversity, and it would be pointless for public policy to try to achieve that.
16. We have not at this stage gone into detail. We hope that our main point – the importance of family policy and particularly the role of fathers, in discussing demographic trends – can be taken fully on board in any future work by the Commission. FNF would be glad to participate in any future work and discussions organised by the Commission in this context.



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