

SPEECH TO GRANDPARENTS PLUS

LIZ KENDALL MP

SHADOW MINISTER FOR CARE AND OLDER PEOPLE

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Introduction

I'm really delighted to be here today. I'm only sorry I won't be able to stay until the end. We've got a debate in the House of Commons this afternoon on the need for a Minister for Older People in the Cabinet and I'm responding from our frontbench.

The reason I've been so keen to take part in this event is something you all know but is worth repeating nevertheless.

Which is that grandparents are an essential part of the fabric of British life, making a huge contribution to their families and communities, our economy and society as whole.

I see this every day, in my constituency and my own family.

Many families simply wouldn't be able to cope without grandparents' help.

Picking up the children after school until mum and dad get back from work, but also as your survey shows, increasingly caring for their grandchildren permanently and full time.

At the same time, people have a life beyond that of their role as a grandparent.

3.5 million grandparents in the UK are still working. Local businesses and the economy benefit hugely from their skills and experience and incomes.

Grandparents also have a big role in their communities – in local voluntary organisations, as local councillors, in our public services, churches and faith groups.

They also care for their loved ones at the other end of the age spectrum – for their husbands or wives, siblings, aunts and uncles, and their own parents too.

And grandparents also want to do things for themselves – at least when they have time!

Particularly when they're retired, grandparents want to try out new things, spend time with their friends, travel to new places if they can afford to – they want to have fun.

The challenge

The problem is that politicians and policy makers often don't reflect the reality of many grandparents' lives.

This is particularly true in family policy, which focuses predominantly on the needs of working parents – mums, and increasingly dads' need for family leave, flexible working and affordable and good quality childcare.

Part of the reason for this is that we still too often have a stereotypical image of grandparents.

The frail white-haired grandmother, sitting at home, making cups of tea when the family pops round at the weekend.

This is part of a wider challenge, which is changing the way we see and treat older people in society.

We wouldn't think of 0 to 50 year olds as one group, yet that's precisely what we do for those aged 50 to 80, 90 and even 100 years old.

We haven't got to grips with the fact that people in their 50s, 60s, and even 70s aren't 'old' and certainly don't see themselves as such – I know my Mum and Dad don't.

So the issues we're debating today are absolutely vital in securing a much wider shift in how we as a society and country get to grips with the reality and impact of our ageing population.

And how policy needs to change as people live longer, and want, need and deserve to have a full, healthy and fulfilling life for longer.

Ideas for the future

The key challenge is to ensure we understand and support the reality of family life in Britain today – in all shapes and forms.

As you know, Labour is reviewing our policies in the run up to the next general election. We're looking at three key themes: rebuilding the economy, rebuilding society, and renewing politics too.

Jon Cruddas is leading this work, and I want to set out a couple of issues that I think we need to consider as part of this process, building on the work that Tessa Jowell in particular has been doing on reviewing our family policy.

1) Support for working grandparents

The first is support for working grandparents.

At the moment, there is no specific support for the 23% of grandparents over 50 who are still in paid work. As your survey shows, only Denmark and Sweden have a higher percentage of working grandparents at around 30%.

In some European countries, grandparents have the right to parental leave under certain circumstances when parents are unable to take it.

In Germany, grandparents can take up to 10 days of paid leave to care for a grandchild in a medical emergency, and in Portugal grandparents are allowed to take 30 days of paid leave a year to care for a sick grandchild if parents can't.

Some innovative companies in UK are already give flexible working options to employees who have grandchildren.

For example, employees who work for ASDA are entitled to 5 days' unpaid leave at the birth of a grandchild, or for a child's first day at school or religious festivals. They can also apply to take an extended period of leave of up to 12 weeks which is often used by grandparents looking after children during the summer holidays.

As Tessa has said, our policy review needs to consider the lessons from other countries – how we can best recognise the role of working grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren and how we can encourage more businesses to do so too.

2) Support for grandparents who are primary carers

The second issue we should look at is how we help grandparents who don't just care for their grandchildren now and then, but are their primary carers.

Around 200,000 grandparents are raising their grandchildren full time, many in challenging circumstances and with limited support.

Again, your survey shows the proportion of UK grandparents in this 'skipped generation' is higher than most other countries, except for US, and it's increasing too.

Where grandparents have a formal role in raising a grandchild they usually have Special Guardianship orders or Resident orders. But while these give them responsibility for the children, they don't necessarily come with all the support that they need.

3 out of 5 grandparents find themselves financially hard-up because they either have to give up work or reduce their paid working hours in such situations.

We know that when grandparents and other family members are able to care for children full-time rather than children going into care, there are significant savings for the state.

So there is an economic case for providing support for these grandparents, as well as a moral case.

Our policy review should look at whether better support for kinship carers would mean more grandparents would be able to care for their grandchildren instead of them going into care – in many cases this will be better for the child involved as well as saving the state resource.

Conclusion

There are many other issues we could discuss today, but I hope this is useful contribution to the debate.

I also hope many of you here today will work with us as we develop our thinking in more detail in the months and years ahead.

Ends