



Church of Ireland

Work and Families: Choice and Flexibility
Department of Trade and Industry

Response

This response was prepared by:

Lord Ken Maginnis of Drumglass, Chairman of Social Justice and Theological Panel (NI)
of the Church and Society Committee

Revd John McDowell, Chairman of Church of Ireland Marriage Council

Mrs Paddy Wallace, All-Ireland President of the Mothers' Union

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Church of Ireland,
The General Synod,
Church of Ireland House,
Church Avenue,
Rathmines,
Dublin 6.

Tel: (+353 1) 497 8422
Fax: (+353 1) 497 8821
E-mail: synod@rcbdub.org

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Introduction

The family is the foundation institution of all societies. Social thinkers from Plato to Marx have wished that it were otherwise but the family as a permanent but evolving unit is at the heart of human living; forever changing, forever the same. It is the single most important factor in socialising children and good family life is as near to the Kingdom of God as we experience on earth. Bad or even inadequate family life may cause irreparable damage to the human personality and the cost to society is incalculable.

Work is also an integral feature of the human vocation where individuals are further socialised and their personalities are developed in proportion to the degree to which their gifts are nurtured and given scope for expression. By these means both human and economic wealth are created. However in the most rudimentary sense the family has priority over work as it both forms and expresses the character of its members in an almost unalterable way. The family's role in the formation of character is especially potent in early years.

One interesting way of expressing this is to point out that members of one family are not interchangeable with those of another as each is a part of the formation of the others in the family unit. So although the family at certain points devolves responsibility for certain functions (e.g. education) to others it has some functions (e.g. nurture), which can only be performed by others with varying lesser degrees of adequacy.

The family has a close relationship with the work culture of any society but it cannot be infinitely adaptable. The family instinctively knows when work culture makes demands of families which are damaging at a fundamental level. For "work" to demand too much from the family is to saw off the branch on which it is sitting. However the sheer rate of change in working patterns and practices has placed the family in a most precarious position. The hidden hand of the market has moved rapidly to ensure that single income families will in most cases struggle to make ends meet.

As a result the demands made on the family as an adaptive organism have been much greater in the past thirty years than in the one hundred years prior to that. Simply providing financial incentives or a better childcare infrastructure may not be the long-term answer to either healthier families or more productive workplaces.

So while accepting the main focus of the "Work and Families" document we feel that the most urgent need would be for government to introduce financial, fiscal and pension rewards for those mothers who choose to stay at home with their children. Such a system should also take into account the need for women to take a career break at crucial times in the life of their families, not just around the time of birth.

It is with these reservations and caveats in mind that we make our response to the proposals.

As you will see from the comments below many of the questions raised in the document are of such a technical and detailed nature that we have felt ourselves unequipped to provide constructive responses.

Responses

Q1-3. These are extremely technical matters which we have no doubt that employer and employee representative bodies will offer advice on. We would simply make the point that even the current system of rules relating to maternity entitlements is complex and difficult for many mothers to understand. Perhaps a much higher proportion of departmental budgets could be allocated to the writing of information booklets and that these booklets evolve as proposals are developed, rather than when all the deliberations have been concluded. It might also be an idea to market test the intelligibility of advice brochures on a representative sample of would-be mothers.

Q4-6. It seems reasonable that mothers should have to confirm their date of return but that there should be more flexibility in the system to allow for changing circumstances. Moreover if entitlement to maternity pay is extended to one year (and the additional cost is largely recouped from government) it might be possible for employers to make the assumption that all eligible employees will take full advantage unless they indicate otherwise at the outset of entitlement.

We do recognise the need of employers to have clear information on which to base personnel planning. However it is unlikely that one timescale will fit all. Perhaps this could be agreed on a company-by-company basis but within mandatory limits.

Q7. We would favour a leaflet produced on the lines suggested in our answer to Q1-3 above and made available through the workplace, in doctors' surgeries, public libraries, community facilities etc. "Reasonable contact" can mean anything or nothing, therefore the leaflet should make clear the duties of both employers and employees. It could contain specimen forms laid out to leave spaces for the employer to fill in agreed contact dates. It should make clear that the employees can contact the employer at any time for discussion/advice/clarification.

Q8. A one-stop-shop linked to the local Jobs/Benefits office would be very helpful as many people will feel happier speaking to someone directly about their best course of action. Perhaps Citizens Advice Bureaux could also be given an expanded role for the dissemination of information and advice.

Q 9. Women who have been at home for some time may need to update their skills and also build up their confidence. A gradual return to work would be welcome perhaps beginning with a week's work shadowing to have time to take in changes and assess what back to work training is needed. Professional bodies would need to look at refresher courses for women returning to work.

Q10. How long is a piece of string? This would have to be piloted as it is breaking new ground and will be the subject of much guess work. Naturally it should be agreed as between the parents and all involved employers. Our initial feeling is that Option 2 – "any leave and pay after six months following the start of maternity leave".

Q11-18. We did not feel qualified to answer these complex technical questions.

Q 19-21. We would strongly urge the implementation of Options 3&4 i.e. caring for any adult relative or any disabled dependent. Flexible working for those caring for a dependent helps everyone. It is also the hallmark of a civilised society that respects those who take on such emotionally and morally demanding tasks. It reduces stress on the carer/employee and the employer in return receives not only better productivity but also loyalty and reciprocal respect. The need for this sort of incentive is made greater because of the clear inability of the National Health Service to cope with convalescent patients much less the chronically ill.

Q22-25. Regardless of age there are times when flexibility in working hours is required. Option 3 would be highly preferable but at the very least Option 2 would suffice. The period when children are in transition between primary and secondary education is critical in terms of parental support. Children are very vulnerable at this stage as they are assumed to be confident and independent which is not always the case all of the time. Parental availability for perhaps even only short periods at point of crisis or illness would avoid an infinity of difficulties later.

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