



Briefing paper on people Ageing without Children

Introduction

The numbers of people over 65 without adult children are set to double from 1.2 million at the present time to 2 million by 2030. At the moment 92% of informal care is provided by family¹ and 80% of older people with disabilities are cared for by either their spouse or adult children². The older a person is, the more likely they are to be cared for by their adult child. This year for the first time, more older people need care than there is family available to provide it.

“As the baby-boomer generation ages, a growing ‘family care gap’ will develop as the number of older people in need of care outstrips the number of adult children able to provide it. This is expected to occur for the first time in 2017” The Generation Strain, Institute of Public Policy Research 2014

Little thought has been given thus far to what happens to those older people who have no children or indeed other family to help and support them in later life.

Definition of ageing without children

Individuals are ageing without children for a wide range of reasons including

- those who have never been parents either through choice or through circumstance
- those whose children predeceased them
- those estranged from their children
- those whose children live far away
- those whose children are unable to support them for another reason e.g. they have a long term disability or they are in prison

Demographic data

- The number of women who have not become mothers has more than doubled in a generation, from 9% to 19%.³

¹ *Measuring National Well-being - Households and Families, 2012* Ian Macrory: Office for National Statistics

² Hoff A, *Current and future challenges of family care in the UK*. Zittau/Goerlitz University of Applied Sciences, 2015.

³ Ratcliffe R, and Smith S, *Fertility and women's education in the UK: A cohort analysis*. Bristol University, 2006.



- Although the Office of National Statistics does not record data on how many men become fathers is estimated that around 23 per cent of men over 45 are without children.⁴
- 90% of LGBT people are estimated to be ageing without children,⁵
- An estimated 85% of people with disabilities have no children⁶
- The number of older people with disabilities who live alone and have no child is projected to increase rapidly, rising by nearly 80 per cent between 2007 and 2032⁷
- People ageing without children are up to 31% more likely to be carers for elderly parents⁸
- People ageing without children are 25% more likely to go into residential care, and at an earlier age and lower level of dependency⁹
- People ageing without children generally have poorer health and have a life expectancy up to 2 years below that of parents¹⁰
- The increase in the numbers of people ageing without children has also led to the rise of the so called 'bean pole family'. This occurs when a family has more generations with living members but fewer members in each generation. The impact of this is that more people are growing old, not only without children, but also without siblings, nephews or nieces

Policy context

Successive Governments have failed to get to grips with the issue of both how to fund social care, and ensure that it is of a good quality. This coupled with difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff in both health and social care along with the austerity programme of

⁴ Donno A, Miettinen A, Rotkirch A, Szalma I and Tanturri M-L, *Increasing Childlessness in Europe: Timetrends and country differences. Working paper in the series 'Changing families and sustainable societies: Policy contexts and diversity over the life course and across generations'*. Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto; University of Padova, 2015.

⁵ Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, at Hunter College, and Senior Action in a Gay Environment. *Assistive Housing for Elderly Gays and Lesbians in New York City: Extent of need and the preferences of elderly gays and lesbians*, 1999.

⁶ Disabled Living Foundation, 'Key Facts', www.dlf.org.uk/content/key-facts ; and Best Beginnings, 'Parents with Disabilities', www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/parents-with-disabilities .

⁷ Pickard, Linda et al *Mapping the future of family care: receipt of informal care by older people with disabilities in England to 2032. Social Policy and Society*, 11 (4). pp. 533-545. ISSN 1475-74

⁸ Pesando LM, *Childlessness and Upward Intergenerational Support: Cross-National Evidence from Eleven European Countries*, paper European Population Conference 2016

⁹ *Childlessness at the end of life: evidence from rural Wales* WENGER G. *Clare Ageing and Society*, 29(8), November 2009, pp.1243-1259. Cambridge University Press

¹⁰ Modig K, Talbäck M, Torssander J, et al *Payback time? Influence of having children on mortality in old age* *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2017;**71**:424-430.



reduced public spending has resulted in fewer people receiving social care ¹¹ and Government policy insofar as it exists has been to focus on adult children doing more.

"We need to start thinking as a society about how we deal with care of our own parents. One of the things that has struck me as I've been doing this role is that nobody ever questions the fact that we look after our children, that's just obvious. Nobody ever says it is a caring responsibility, it's just what you do. I think some of that logic and some of way we think about that, in terms of the sort of volume of numbers that we are seeing coming down the track, will have to impinge on the way we start thinking about how we look after our parents. In a way, it is a responsibility in terms of our life cycle that is similar." ¹² David Mowat Minister for Care January 2017

"Family planning must be as much about care for older generations as planning for younger ones. A wholesale repairing of the social contract so that children see their parents giving wonderful care to grandparents – and recognise that in time that will be their responsibility too" Jeremy Hunt Secretary of State for Health 2015 ¹³

There is no current evidence to suggest that criteria to access social care will be loosened or that there will be a significant boost in social care spending during the lifetime of this Parliament. Despite the fallout from the so called dementia tax, Government is likely to focus policy on individuals with assets funding their own care rather than raising taxes nationally. Alongside this will be a continued drive for family and community to do more to support older people who need help and care.

Impact on health and social care

Access to unpaid care

Research has shown that people ageing without children are less likely to have unpaid care support when their health deteriorates

"The absence of children is not clearly associated to a disadvantaged situation when health is good, but when someone becomes frail and loses their independence in carrying out daily living activities, childlessness becomes a problem. The worst situation in terms of the availability of informal support is clearly that of the frail elderly who are both childless and unmarried or widowed, especially if they are men" ¹⁴

¹¹ Age UK Briefing: Health and Care of Older People in England 2017

¹² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/31/parents-responsible-care-elderlymothers-fathers-much-children/>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/personal-responsibility>

¹⁴ Childlessness and support networks in later life: a new public welfare demand? Evidence from Italy Marco Albertini Letizia Mencarini 2011



Furthermore it has also been demonstrated that extended family e.g. siblings, nephews/nieces, cousins, friends and neighbours do not make up the care deficit if one does not have a nuclear family. Essentially, the more support a person needs, the less robust their support network is in being able to meet their needs

“Childless people tend to compensate for the absence of exchanges with their own children by more frequently extending their networks to neighbours and friends, and by getting more involved in community activities. They also tend to develop stronger ties with other family members – parents, siblings and, along the generational line, nephews and nieces.....However when strong support is needed, these compensatory arrangements work only partially. When getting frail and acquiring limitations in their ability to carry out the activities of daily living, childless people receive much less support than parents, are more likely to enter residential care, and do so at lower levels of dependency”¹⁵

Access to formal care

The lack of unpaid care has an inevitable knock on effect to paid for formal care care; evidence shows that older people without children and especially those who are widowed are more likely to need formal care services ¹⁶ People ageing without children are 25% more likely to enter into residential care ¹⁷ which given the limited alternatives to residential care that exist in the UK and the precipitous state of the residential care market is extremely worrying.

However there is evidence to show that although individuals ageing without children do use formal care more than those with children, it is a more complex picture than one would expect

“Two of the very few studies on the utilization of formal care services by the childless clearly indicate that elderly non-parents tend to use formal service provision more frequently and intensively than parents do. But the same studies also show that the utilization of public care services by the elderly is strongly mediated by the presence of children, who act as advocates on behalf of their parents (Choi 1994; Larsson and Silverstein 2004).....As a

¹⁵ *What Childless Older People Give: Is the Generational Link Broken? Albertinin M and Kohli M Ageing and Society 29(08):1261 - 1274 · November 2009*

¹⁶ *Wenger, C. G., Dykstra, P. A., Tuula, M., & Knipscheer, K. (2007). Social embeddedness and latelife parenthood: Community activity, close ties, and support networks. Journal of Family Issues, 28, 1419–1456. doi:10.1177/0192513X07303895*

¹⁷ *Childlessness at the end of life: evidence from rural Wales WENGER G. Clare Ageing and Society, 29(8), November 2009, pp.1243-1259. Cambridge University Press*



consequence, the utilization of public care services by the childless do not fully compensate for the support deficits they face”¹⁸

Moreover as is outlined above, poor health is the key determinant of whether people need help in their later life. People aging without children are more likely to have risky health behaviours such as higher alcohol consumption and smoking levels. ¹⁹They are also more likely to be underweight which some studies have attributed to lacking support with shopping and meal preparation and have higher mortality rates than parents ²⁰ It may therefore be the case that people ageing without children are more at risk of failing health in later life than those with support from children. If this is the case, then they are more likely to need care and support

Conclusion

Over the next 20/30 years there will be unprecedented numbers of people without children reaching oldest old age. Policy and planning focused on older people being supported by their children/grandchildren in later life will not meet this need and risks leaving individuals ageing without children dangerously unsupported.

2. Smaller families in general means that it must not be assumed wider family networks will “step up” in the absence of children both because there will be fewer people available within families but also because as shown above, wider family networks fall away as care needs get higher

3. Both of the above mean that that there will be a greater reliance on formal care services by people ageing without children at a time when they have never been under such intense pressure. Public spending reductions and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff mean that residential care homes are closing, private sector providers are handing back contracts and voluntary organisations are struggling to cope with the additional demand on their services which have in turn also faced cuts. This crisis in formal care has serious consequences for people ageing without children who are more likely to need it.

¹⁸ *Childlessness and support networks in later life: a new public welfare demand? Evidence from Italy* Marco Albertini Letizia Mencarini 2011

¹⁹ *How Does Childlessness Affect Older Americans' Health Status and Behavior?* Robert D. Plotnick February 2011 Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs and Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology University of Washington

²⁰ Modig K, Talbäck M, Torssander J, et al Payback time? Influence of having children on mortality in old age *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2017;71:424-430.



People ageing without children who need care and support in later life face significant barriers including

- No one to play the role of advocate to speak for them and curate care
- Lack of informal support networks compared to those with children
- Shrinking state provision

To overcome these hurdles, people ageing without children need targeted interventions that accommodate the lack of family support available to them.

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