

The National Troubled Families Programme

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Abstract: This article describes the Government's Troubled Families national programme setting out its aims to 'turn around' 120,000 families who have multiple problems. The eligibility criteria for the programme cover families involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour; having children who are regularly truanting or not in school; an adult on out-of-work benefits, or otherwise are of high costs to the local authority. However for most of these families, such problems are elements in a complex picture where many other issues are at play. A representation is depicted of families who have multiple problems where there is no 'single stand-out' root cause. A holistic approach has evolved towards family intervention as it is claimed that to date problems have been treated in isolation resulting in services lacking a systematic approach. Some of the thinking behind this programme is laid out as are proffered solutions. Usually the Troubled Families approach employs one worker or team taking responsibility to enable a process of engagement to secure rapport, trust and participation in an agency intervention, introducing stability and consistency into the family home. The programme is to be expanded beyond 2015 to work with a larger number of families over a five-year period.

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The Troubled Families Programme is the first national programme designed to get to grips with the challenge of a group of families who have long-standing and seemingly intractable problems. This programme is working at considerable scale, with all 152 upper tier local authorities in England signed up to the programme, working to 'turn around' 120,000 families over the lifetime of the programme.

To be eligible for help under the Troubled Families Programme, families have to meet three of the following four criteria:

- Are involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour
- Have children who are regularly truanting or not in school
- Have an adult on out of work benefits
- Cause high costs to the taxpayer

However for most of these families, such problems are often part of a much more complex picture where many other issues are at play. We have recently published a report - *Understanding Troubled Families*¹ – which is based on data collected by local authorities of a sample of families who have been helped by the Troubled Families Programme². This showed in addition to the expected problems related to crime and anti-social behaviour, absence from school, and unemployment, that on entry to the programme, troubled families had the following characteristics:³

- 71% of families had a health problem
- 42% of families had had *police called out* to their address in the previous six months.
- 29% of troubled families were *experiencing* domestic violence or abuse on entry to the programme.
- Over a *third of families* (35%) had a child who was either a Child in Need, subject to child protection arrangements or where a child had been taken into care
- *One-in-five* (21%) had been at risk of eviction in the previous six months

Families had on average *nine problems* related to employment, education, crime, housing, child protection, parenting or health on entry to the programme. This is based on those families for which full data were available across every problem (1048 families)⁴

Of course, families who are eligible for help as part of the troubled families programme will have problems. However the findings from the data are striking in both the number and breadth of problems families face. Having so many different problems within a household unit will make each individual problem more difficult to tackle. Individuals within families do not operate in isolation and the problems of one will affect another, reinforcing each other and having a serious and cumulative effect on a family's ability to function.

The data reveal multiple problems but, interestingly, there is no single stand-out

issue that might be described as the underlying problem or root cause. Instead a picture is painted of families who are sinking under the weight of multiple problems which are interwoven, feeding each other and often spiralling out of control.

These families and the difficulties they experience therefore present a complex challenge to public services.

In many cases, families lack the social support and skills to cope with serious illnesses, bereavement or emotional upheaval, which can be the trigger for a serious decline in the family's circumstances. These are also often stories which have repeated themselves across generations: children with disrupted childhoods growing up into adults with the same chaotic lives as their parents, unable to break the cycle. These are themes explored in a report called *Listening to Troubled Families*⁵ that documented the life histories of some from within troubled families.

It is also important to acknowledge that these families not only have problems: they often cause problems too. Their classmates, neighbours and community suffer the consequences of anti-social behaviour: rows which spill out into the street, litter and graffiti, regular police call outs. Not only does this cause untold misery for those around them, the cost to the taxpayer is immense. Our estimates suggest that somewhere in the region of £9 billion is spent on these families each year. But with £8bn of that estimated to be spent on reactive services, that money is having a very limited impact. It is patching these families up, dealing with single incidents: but it is not stopping those problems from recurring weeks or even days later. That is neither affordable nor sustainable. The issue is not a lack of money being spent on these families, but too much of it not being spent effectively.

Of course, the Troubled Families Programme is not the first time that these families have been involved with public services. Due to the level of problems experienced by families, many are only too well known to a wide range of agencies, A family might have a complete roster of professionals: mental health workers, education welfare officers, probation officers, Youth Offending Team workers and social workers. However, what seems to be missing is the sense of the whole picture and of any systematic approach to change. This is a critical omission. No-one lives in isolation: we are all shaped by our circumstances and there is no more important influence on our lives than our family. But we have been treating different problems in isolation from one other, without a true examination of how those problems may be linked. Services are compartmentalised and different professionals coming and going just adds to the sense of confusion.

The proliferation of services allows families who want to avoid help to play one off against the other while those that do want help get confused about who's who and who to turn to.

Professionals meet to discuss concerns and decide on action but this often focuses on individual services addressing individual problems and symptoms rather than what is at root of the problems in the family. Services open cases when problems reach a certain threshold and then close them again when the problem is contained. None of this is down to any lack of intent or goodwill on the part of the professionals

involved. They share the frustration that their work is containing rather than solving problems. But the fact is that our public services are too divided: by funding streams, data protection fears, professional approach, by culture, and with the best will in the world, individual workers can find those barriers impossible to surmount.

That is where the troubled families approach is different. It treats the family as a family, with one worker or team taking responsibility for understanding the underlying issues within the family and getting to grips with the causes of the problems rather than reacting to the symptoms. These family support workers, family intervention workers or key workers come from a range of backgrounds: some are from social work and youth work, some are nursery staff and some are teachers, some are police officers and housing officers. Their background is not as important as their skills and their tenacity. These are people who are deeply practical, unafraid to roll up their sleeves and get things done. The 'family intervention approach' has been set out in the *Working with Troubled Families Report*⁶ and its five factors of family intervention underpin the approach promoted through the Troubled Families Programme.

In some cases families lack basic skills: as a result, homes are in chaos, and in disrepair, relationships are dysfunctional, families lack structure, routine and predictability. Family intervention workers ask the family what they want to change, what is bothering them most and help them make the changes step by step – whether that is clearing up, fixing an oven which has never worked and means they can't cook, or getting children to bed in the evening. They introduce stability and consistency into the family's home. They win trust, respect and a willingness to engage through consistency and living up to their promises. They don't wait for families to come to them and within office hours: they go the family's home and work with them there, helping with practical tasks and seeing what family life is like. They are a role model and an authority figure. They teach parenting skills, make sure appointments are kept, bring in specialist help when needed, and generally hold the hands of all the family members until they are back on their feet and able to do these things for themselves. But the relationship is also a tough one where it needs to be. Family intervention workers are honest and prepared to say difficult things that the families need to hear, in language they understand. In some instances, it is made clear that this approach represents a last chance before children are taken into care or families are evicted.

The experience of the programme suggests that families respond incredibly well to this 'tough love.' And time and time again what I see, what workers, families and what service directors tell me, is that the root of this success is the relationship between the family and their key worker. Workers listen to the families and get to see and understand the family circumstances and dynamics and the factors that have led them to this point. Looking at the family from the 'inside out' enables them to help the families to bring about changes. Families on the whole want to change: not just for themselves, but for their children. But they often don't know where to

start. Family intervention workers show them how, and then help them through the difficulties ahead. The results of this programme are already extremely positive. More than 53,000 families had had their lives 'turned around' as of May 2014 - two years into the programme – meaning that children have been attending school for three terms, crime and anti-social behaviour have been significantly reduced and/or an adult is back in work. When reflecting on the histories of these families, that is truly outstanding: a credit to the families, the workers supporting them, and the councils and public services prepared to invest in this new way of working.

But as well as these individual successes based on a different kind of relationship between families and workers, the troubled families programme also demonstrates why we need to change the way services work as a whole with families of this complexity. Families with an average of nine different problems simply cannot be dealt with by nine different agencies making nine different interventions in nine different ways. Neither can more multi-agency meetings be the answer, more 'joining up' however well intentioned. It is absolutely right that the responsible services take an interest and offer support, information and resources for this work. So yes, services should come together, consider the whole family and agree a plan. But in some cases the right thing will then be for some agencies to step away and allow one skilled worker to devote meaningful time and space to work with the whole family on all of its problems, bringing in other services when appropriate.

This is sometimes difficult, for understandably risk averse and often siloed public services, to accept. Yet services have become so concerned with narrow systems and processes that we have been in danger of our efforts not translating to lasting change for vulnerable people. Services have not been responding to what they really need: on the one hand, expecting them to understand technical jargon and cope with a multitude of professionals and on the other, having such low expectations that we have tolerated failure and non-compliance without consequences. But the success of this programme should be the impetus for a transformation of services for families with multiple problems which are able to respond at a family level to the needs of the families as a whole.

The Troubled Families Programme is to be expanded beyond 2015 to work with a larger number of families over a five year period. It builds on the work undertaken by local authorities across the country of working with families with multiple problems – this time focusing on a wider group of families with younger vulnerable children, families where there is domestic violence and families where there are health problems. However, the ways of working pioneered by the family intervention approach will continue to underpin the programme as will the principle that no family is beyond help, and that every family has the capacity for change .

Notes

- 1 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336430/Understanding_Troubled_Families_web_format.pdf
- 2 The data is collected as part of the National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme, undertaken by Ecorys UK.
- 3 These figures are based on data for the weighted sample of 6577 families, although because of missing data the base numbers for the percentages included in the bullets vary. The base numbers can be found in the Ecorys report which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-evaluation-of-the-troubled-families-programme>
- 4 This average is based on 1,048 families where the data were complete across all 35 variables. It is important to note that this is based on only a sixth of the families included on the database and is more likely to include families where the quality of data is better. It may not be representative of families on the programme or in the larger sample. See the Ecorys report for a full breakdown of base sizes.
- 5 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6151/2183663.pdf
- 6 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/66113/121214_Working_with_troubled_families_FINAL_v2.pdf