

Adfam discussion paper: Troubled Families Update

The Troubled Families Programme (TFP) was launched in April 2012 as a response to the riots in England in the summer of 2011. It sought to 'turn around' the lives of 120,000 'troubled families' in the country, including families affected by substance use. The government states that these are families with multiple needs, facing numerous disadvantages and causing high costs to the taxpayer, and David Cameron pledged to 'turn around' these families by the end of the coalition's term in 2015. This is a progress update, with a review of research and commentary pertaining to the TFP more than two years on.

Background

The government reached the 120,000 figure using 7 indicators of disadvantage taken from an earlier study into multiple deprivation. These included unemployment, poor housing, lack of qualifications, mental health, long-standing illness/disability, low income and an inability to afford basic provisions.

However, for inclusion in the TFP, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) settled on a much narrower set of 3 criteria:

1. Involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour
2. Children not attending school
3. An adult on out-of-work benefits.

Local Authorities are responsible for the identification of these families in their areas and for providing appropriate interventions. Supplementary to the 3 criteria, however, is a fourth '**higher costs' criterion**, under which Local Authorities are able to target families they are concerned about using discretionary filters. Guidance recommends that the fourth criterion could include families with a child subject to a Child Protection Plan, families having frequent police call-outs or arrests and **families with health problems - including drug and alcohol use**.¹ Figures on how many and which local areas are using these filters, however, are currently unavailable, and rates of success are not included in data releases.

Local Authorities are incentivised to work with troubled families through a payment-by-results (PBR) scheme: they are paid firstly for 'attaching' a family to the programme, and later for results achieved –

¹ DCLG (2012) *The Troubled Families Programme. Financial Framework for the Troubled Families programme's payment-by-results scheme for Local Authorities*

'results relating to the 3 criteria noted above. To accommodate for the number of families that are inevitably not 'turned around' (and for the PBR outcomes which can therefore not be claimed), the DCLG has advised Local Authorities to work with more families than specified by the indicative numbers.

Despite research findings strongly indicating that drugs and alcohol are predominant features in 'troubled families' lives, unfortunately, it has featured little in political discourse around the TFP.² Where families affected by substance use have been mentioned, it is typically in relation to the high costs incurred to Local Authorities, rather than as problematic to a family in its own right.

The Results

Year one of the programme was loudly proclaimed by government to have been a huge success:

- Families identified: 66,470
- Families being worked with: 35,618

18 months on, the government released figures on the number of families achieving each of the possible outcomes:

- Families identified (at Sep 2013): 92,694
- Families worked with (Sep 2013): 62,527
- No. achieving crime/ASB/education outcome (at Oct 2013): 20,674*
- No. achieving continuous employment outcome (Oct 2013): 1,430
- Families 'turned around' (Oct 2013): 22,104

The **most recent figures**, released in July 2014, show:

- Families identified (at March 2014): 111,574
- Families worked with (March 2014): 97,202
- No. achieving crime/ASB/education outcome (May 2014): 48,278
- No. achieving continuous employment (March 2014): 4,555
- Families 'turned around' (March 2014): 52,833

**This overall figure collates the number achieving one or more of the outcomes. Figures for success against each measure are not released.*

² DCLG (July 2012) *Listening to Troubled Families. A report by Louise Casey CB, Department for Communities and Local Government*

Expansion

In June 2013, the government announced a ‘massive expansion’ of the TFP, saying that it would be investing an **extra £200million** in 2015/16. The government intends the funds to cover the five year period from April 2015 to March 2020, and claims that the increased investment will help reach an **extra 400,000 ‘high risk’ families**.³

Commentary

Is the TFP on track to ‘turn around’ the lives of 120,000 troubled families by May 2015?

The government has consistently praised councils for making ‘great strides in a very short space of time’, professing how these families’ problems are being dealt with through a ‘no nonsense’ and ‘common sense’ approach.⁴ Yet despite such high-profile claims as to the success of the TFP, doubts have been raised as to whether it is in fact on track to meet its own set targets.

The most recent set of figures released show that at the end of May 2014, **44% of the 120,000 (52,833 families) had been ‘turned around’**. However, **only 3.8% of the 120,000 (4,555 families) had achieved the work outcome**: 4.7% of the total number of families worked with and 4.1% of those identified. These figures, according to some commentators, are lower than one may have hoped in light of the government’s evident enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the TFP – and more so, given its decision to invest an extra £200million into the programme without robust evaluation findings and despite no in-depth analysis having been carried out.⁵ Indeed, a recent report by the Public Accounts Committee concluded:

“The departments will not meet their targets without increasing the rate at which they have been succeeding in their work with troubled families.”⁶

If the government wishes to successfully turn around the remaining families by the end of its term, it is necessary, according to the report, that performance in each Local Authority be scrutinized to ‘properly manage the contracts giving appropriate support where appropriate, but also to impose sanctions

³ How the government arrived at this figure is unknown and a freedom of information request failed to receive clarification on the issue – see: Stephen Crossley (5 October 2013) ‘High risk’ families and ‘decision-based evidence making’ <http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2013/10/05/high-risk-families-and-decision-based-evidence-making/>

⁴ DCLG (Press release) *Troubled Families Programme on track at half way stage* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/troubled-families-programme-on-track-at-half-way-stage>

⁵ Crossley (March 2014) *In a hurry: Fast policy and ‘troubled families* <http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2014/03/19/in-a-hurry-fast-policy-and-troubled-families/>

⁶ Public Accounts Committee (March 2014) *Programmes to help families facing multiple challenges (Fifty first report)*

where necessary'.⁷ The DCLG will only meet its target of turning around 120,000 families if each Local Authority meets its individual commitment, and performance in different Local Authorities has been extremely varied: for example, Wakefield has turned around 925 of 930 families, and Bristol 1,158 of 1,355; whereas Birmingham have managed to turn around only 1,590 of the supposed 4,180 troubled families in their area, and Devon 363 of their 1,370. In order to address these discrepancies and improve overall performance, the scope for Local Authorities to learn from each other is in need of greater consideration.⁸

The decision to use PBR as the delivery and funding mechanism for the programme was partly intended to focus Local Authorities on achieving outcomes for families. Local Authorities are entitled to claim a maximum of £4,000 for their work with one family, part of which is paid upfront as an attachment fee and the rest when an outcome is attained. The split between the attachment and outcomes payments is on a sliding scale from 80:20 in year one, to 60:40 in year two, to 40:60 in year three. Findings from the National Audit Office (NAO) show that many Local Authorities are not making full use of all the available government funding, and are currently budgeting to spend the attachment fee only,⁹ suggesting that the outcomes payment may not be sufficiently incentivised. If the PBR scheme is failing to incentivise Local Authorities to invest all the available funding into their services in order to maximise outcomes for families, an obvious impediment to the government's target of turning around 120,000 families by next year is presented.

The NAO report also criticised the government's failure to sufficiently integrate two separate governmental schemes with very similar objectives: the DCLG's TFP and the DWP's Families with Multiple Problems.¹⁰ The NAO suggests that had the two programmes been effectively coordinated, we may have seen better results in getting families into employment, and had a better chance of making lasting improvements to their lives.

Is the TFP effectively 'turning around' 'troubled families'?

The design of the programme and the DCLG's definition of 'turned around' has been subject to significant criticism, most notably for the disparity between the measures of disadvantage which led to the government's estimation that there are 120,000 of these 'troubled families', and the much narrower final 3 criteria for inclusion in the programme. Local Authorities themselves have indicated that the 3 criteria potentially excluded some families with multiple challenges in their area,¹¹ and the Select Committee found that the fourth criterion has proved important to Local Authorities in identifying

⁷ Public Accounts Committee (March 2014) *Programmes to help families facing multiple challenges (Fifty first report)*

⁸ NAO (Dec 2013) *Programmes to help families facing multiple challenges*

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

families: 'without it, the definition was too narrow to allow Local Authorities to work with families that were in need of help.'¹²

In addition to the flexibility afforded by the fourth criterion, there is further scope for discretion under two of the three core criteria: the government's definition of antisocial behaviour in the financial framework is intended as an 'indicative rather than exhaustive list',¹³ and guidance from October 2013 advocates professional discretion and 'common sense' when identifying children whose patterns of attendance 'are of equivalent concern to those set out in the existing criterion.'¹⁴ All of this has led some commentators to suggest that a 'troubled family' can essentially be whatever a Local Authority wants it to be.¹⁵

The NAO has acknowledged the 'potential tension' between the objective of the programme and the measures for success: the programme's design means that **a family can be classed as 'turned around' if it shows improvement in just one of the outcome domains**, and this is possible in two ways.

1. Families selected using the fourth criterion can be counted as 'turned around' by meeting one of the other three outcome measures, or
2. Families can be 'turned around' if at least one family member has moved off benefits and into work.¹⁶

The success of the TFP to date, then, lies in the 48,278 families who have improved in educational attendance and/or reductions in crime and antisocial behaviour, although the published results relating to these three factors are aggregated, making it difficult to see the reality of what is going on. **While successfully 'turning around' a family depends on meeting all 3 thresholds, according to the government, this only applies to the minority of families that qualified for the TFP on all counts.**¹⁷ Local Authorities are able to claim they have 'turned around' a family based on certain changes in behaviour even if they have not found work. Therefore, a family's material circumstances may not have changed, or may even have deteriorated; and still the family can be considered 'turned around' and the Local Authority is entitled to claim payment for the result. Likewise, a family is 'turned around' when an adult moves into work, regardless of whether there have been improvements in the education or crime and antisocial behaviour outcomes. The DCLG has attempted to explain this by asserting that those who achieve the work result will be likely to have made progress under the other outcomes first, but many remain unconvinced. Crossley pointed out that Local Authorities are either paid for the crime/antisocial behaviour/education outcome *or* the work outcome, not both; thus, one could argue that there is

¹² Communities and Local Government Committee (October 2013) Third Report *Community Budgets*

¹³ DCLG (2012) *The Troubled Families Programme: Financial Framework for the Troubled Families programme's payment-by-results scheme for Local Authorities*

¹⁴ Stephen Crossley (Jan 2014) *The 'troubled families' number game*

<http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2014/01/17/the-troubled-families-numbers-game/>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ NAO (Dec 2013) *Programmes to help families facing multiple challenges*

¹⁷ Levitas, (March 2014) *'Troubled families' in a spin*

<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Troubled%20Families%20in%20a%20Spin.pdf>

actually a *disincentive* for Local Authorities to adopt a holistic ‘whole family’ approach, contrary to the TFP’s underlying philosophy.¹⁸

So, are these families being ‘turned around’? A recent Freedom of Information request discovered that three quarters of those families already ‘turned around’ are still ‘committing crime, without jobs and with children still excluded from school.’¹⁹ Data from 133 of 152 councils participating in the TFP also found that 1 in 7 families that have been ‘turned around’ were either ‘still on drugs, had children missing from school or involved in criminal acts,’ whilst 60% were living on unemployment benefits after leaving the programme. In Birmingham, of the 1,154 ‘turned around’ as of March 2014, 92% were still receiving unemployment benefits.²⁰ Regarding the work outcome, data released by the Government shows that only 3.8% of the 120,000 have gone into continuous employment. Seventeen Local Authorities have so far failed to get anyone into continuous employment, and a further 21 have only managed 5 or less.

These are families with a complex web of issues, and the objective of the programme is to provide intensive support to families so that they can overcome their problems and make significant changes to their lifestyles and wellbeing – ‘turning their lives around’. Success is evidently defined differently for each family, unique to their particular needs and challenges. Nonetheless, if the children have begun attending school, but meanwhile no one in the family is working, they still struggle to afford food and clothing and the mother is suffering ill-health, has the family been ‘turned around’? This is perhaps the central question surrounding the effectiveness of the whole Troubled Families Programme.

Is the TFP providing good value for money?

The TFP was intended to not only secure social benefits but also to make financial savings. An estimated annual total of £9 billion was spent on troubled families, £8 billion of which was spent *reacting* to their problems rather than preventing them. Whilst figures have been periodically released on the number of families worked with and ‘turned around’, there has been no assessment of the financial savings delivered to date.

An intervention provides good value for money when it exceeds the results of making no intervention at all,²¹ and whilst there have, regrettably, been no such evaluations of the TFP to date, the government have managed to get only 3.8% of the putative total into continuous employment. Furthermore, the ‘successful’ results in education, antisocial behaviour and crime are also precarious, given the scope for

¹⁸ Crossley (Sep 2013) ‘What does ‘turning around’ a ‘troubled family’ really mean?’

<http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/what-does-turning-around-a-troubled-family-really-mean/>

¹⁹ The Guardian (15 June 2014) ‘PM’s flagship scheme not reaching three quarters of troubled families’

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/15/david-cameron-flagship-scheme-troubled-families>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Levitas, (March 2014) ‘Troubled families’ in a spin

<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Troubled%20Families%20in%20a%20Spin.pdf>

discretion and the lack of any comparable data on likely outcomes without TFP intervention.²² The NAO put it like this:

“Whether [the TFP] can deliver [these] benefits at the rate required to meet their ambitious targets will only become clear towards the end of their planned lives. However, performance of the programme[s] to date shows that considerable challenges remain.”²³

What about families affected by drugs and alcohol?

The emphasis on intensive interventions for families with multiple, complex and overlapping needs, problems and disadvantages is extremely welcome. Nevertheless, it appears that the current programme fails to sufficiently recognise and address the problems experienced by families affected by such things as substance use, domestic violence and mental health, amongst a myriad of other issues that multiply-disadvantaged families face.

Louise Casey’s finding in *Listening to Troubled Families* – that substance use was frequently reported by families to have had a huge impact on family life and was strongly linked to their financial troubles – is nothing new.²⁴ The earlier research into Family Intervention Projects (a precursor to the TFP under the Labour Government) conducted by the DCLG further noted that a family’s antisocial behaviour and dysfunction often lead to, or stem from, problems such as ‘drug or alcohol misuse, poor mental health, domestic violence or lack of parenting.’²⁵ Upon referral to FIPs, 39% had poor mental health, 33% were involved in substance use and 28% had been identified as having problems with alcohol,²⁶ whilst substance use was the reported reason for referral to FIP’s in 20% of cases.²⁷ FIPs were found to successfully reduce drug use by 39% and alcohol misuse by 47%.²⁸

It is well established that truancy, anti-social behaviour and crime are often externalisations of underlying issues. However, the TFP criteria inevitably focus providers on treating the symptoms rather than the causes, by transforming multiple elements of multiple deprivation into more limited measures of anti-social behaviour. Although reductions in truancy, anti-social behaviour, crime or unemployment represent valuable progress, they may merely scrape the surface in addressing these families’ real underlying problems: success in achieving these outcomes does not necessarily mean that there has

²² Levitas, (March 2014) *‘Troubled families’ in a spin*

<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Troubled%20Families%20in%20a%20Spin.pdf>

²³ NAO (Dec 2013) *Programmes to help families facing multiple challenges*

²⁴ DCLG (July 2012) *Listening to Troubled Families. A report by Louise Casey CB, Department for Communities and Local Government*

²⁵ DCLG (Dec 2012) *Working with Troubled Families. A guide to the evidence and good practice*

²⁶ DfE (2011) *Monitoring and evaluation of family intervention services and projects between February 2007 and March 2011*

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

been an improvement in the family's mental health, functioning or material circumstances, nor reductions in substance use or domestic violence, for example.

The TFP provides an opportunity to break down local barriers to support for those affected by substance use, and to make use of government funding in drug and alcohol support in the wake of potential disinvestment elsewhere. The fourth criterion here is crucial. Whilst there is no available data on how the fourth criterion is actually being used by each Local Authority,²⁹ an evaluation by the DCLG found that 50% of Local Authorities used domestic violence, drugs, alcohol or substance misuse, and mental health for their local criteria.³⁰ The opportunities for, and importance of, supporting families affected by substance use as provided by the TFP is thus evident.

However, families who are enduring domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues and mental health problems often have very complex, interrelated needs. In order to help these families make positive and sustainable steps forward, it is crucial that the underlying issues (such as substance use) are addressed and considered. This includes the need for flexibility in the criteria and methodologies, longer interventions, specialist support and multi-agency engagement. Moreover, perhaps the most prominent fact we have learnt through evaluations of family support services is the need for the workforce to be highly skilled, trained and able to establish good quality relationships with their clients. An effective workforce should also be seeking to build resilience within the families themselves, in order to better equip them to deal with any potential future crises that may arise. An intervention does not render a family immune from future troubles. There is indeed an opportunity, as the programme widens, to refocus and consider how best to turn around the lives of some of the country's most troubled families – especially those affected by drugs and alcohol.

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w: www.adfam.org.uk
e: policy@adfam.org.uk
t: 020 7553 7640

 @AdfamUK

²⁹ A Freedom of Information request seeking to ascertain which discretionary filters are being used by individual authorities received a response that whilst the DCLG does hold this information, it was not, at the present time, in the public's interest to release the information, and that it will become available in the DCLG's own evaluation to come. See Levitas, (March 2014) *'Troubled families' in a spin*
<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Troubled%20Families%20in%20a%20Spin.pdf>

³⁰ Ibid