action for children

Family support: 21 years of policy

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Developing family policy is a bit like walking a political tightrope; governments face a very real danger of slipping up as they negotiate the fine line between state and family responsibility. Stray too far into what are felt to be private family matters and be met with accusations of nanny statism; leave family issues to the private sphere and face recrimination for undermining family life.

Despite the risks of making family business state business, family policy now has greater political prominence than ever before, and occupies centre stage for all the main political parties. There is a general acceptance of the correlation between social wellbeing and family wellbeing and we now more readily accept the explicit involvement of the state, not only in the traditional areas of family support, but also in more personal matters like parenting. The number of policy initiatives developed since 1997 bears testimony to the current government's interest in the issue.

The past two decades have witnessed demographic change on an unprecedented scale; more mothers are now in paid employment, marriage and parenthood are no longer necessarily synonymous, and the number of lone parent families has increased. Each of these factors has impacted on both the policy and legislative agendas; as the pace of demographic change quickens, so the rate of policy change follows suit. We now have a much better understanding of the impact of negative factors such as poverty and social exclusion on children's outcomes, which has provoked a natural desire to develop new policies and ways of working to respond to risk factors as they emerge.

Looking at family support policy over a 21-year period, four enduring themes emerge, which are examined in greater detail in this article:

- promoting marriage and the traditional family
- developments in welfare policy
- prevention versus crisis intervention
- targeted versus universal services

Promoting marriage and the traditional family

In examining the record of the Conservative Government in the 1980s and early 1990s, one is struck by the volume of speeches, policy and legislation designed to respond to the near-hysterical fear that Britain was experiencing serious moral decline. The era was defined by a series of moral panics – about lone parents, youth crime and so-called 'feral' children – all of which were fuelled by elements of the media. It is ironic, although perhaps a sign of the times, that a government committed to 'rolling back the state' was responsible for legislating on issues such as the collection of maintenance payments from non-resident fathers, the 'promotion' of homosexuality and the expectation that parents should remain involved in their children's lives if they are taken into care.

Two major pieces of legislation at the time – The Children Act 1989 and the Child Support Act 1991 – were positive in many respects, but also reflected the prevailing concern that traditional family values were under attack. The Child Support Act, for example, was presented as a measure that would make non-resident fathers face up to their responsibilities towards their

children. While the rhetoric surrounding the debate was framed in terms of continuing commitment to children following relationship breakdown, the resulting legislation defined these responsibilities almost solely in terms of financial support.

Both pieces of legislation had wider significance, in that they positioned centre stage the issue of fathers' rights and elevated the status of fatherhood. Legislation such as the Adoption and Children Act 2002 further advanced father's rights by extending parental responsibility to unmarried fathers if they are named on the birth certificate, either at the point of registration or subsequently.

The Thatcher and Major governments can be defined by their promotion of the traditional family model; the treatment of lone parent families during the period bears testimony to the fact that they were less concerned with family wellbeing than they were about family structure. Concerns over divorce and the prevalence of lone parent families, for example, were a significant factor in the Major government's ill-fated Back to Basics campaign, and single mothers were subjected to a string of pernicious attacks, most strikingly illustrated by (then Secretary of State for Social Security) Peter Lilley's 'little list....[of] young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing list'.

When the Labour government abolished the married couples tax allowance in 1999 it signalled its reluctance to promote marriage through fiscal measures. However, this approach did not extend to rhetoric and services; *Supporting families*, a Green Paper devoted entirely to family policy issues, provided an early indication of the new government's interest in the family. The document devoted a whole chapter to 'strengthening marriage', which was portrayed as 'the surest foundation for raising children'.[1]

Developments in welfare policy

In contrast to its predecessor, the current government has focused much of its family policy on reforming the allocation of financial resources to families. The historic pledge to end child poverty within a generation stands out as a unique contribution and has been accompanied by a procession of legislation that has made its way to the statute book, including the introduction of the New Deal, reform of lone parent benefits and the launch of tax credits.

The pace of reform in this area has reflected the child poverty pledge, as well as a desire to reduce unemployment and spending on social security benefits. The high turnover in secretaries of state – in 2008 James Purnell became the fourth post-holder in as many years – has also contributed to a sense that the department is in a state of permanent revolution.

Despite the breakneck pace of reform, the rationale for focusing policy and resources on families with children is compelling; between 1979 and 1995–96 rates of child poverty almost trebled and inequalities in health and employment widened. The number of families relying on means-tested benefits for their basic income rose from 8.5 per cent in 1979 to 21 per cent in 1994.[2]

A number of themes have come to characterise the Labour Government's welfare policy. Perhaps the most enduring of these is its 'work first' focus, expressed through the mantra 'work as the best form of welfare'. This has resulted in a range of measures to make work pay, such as the introduction of the National Minimum Wage, the Working Families Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit.

At times, elements of the Labour Government's welfare policy have appeared to be at odds with one another; on the one hand keen to prescribe work as the solution for workless mothers, while alsopromoting a policy of increased parental choice in combining work and family life. There is a similar tension between the 'work first' agenda as a means of alleviating poverty and the commitment to improving children's wellbeing and outcomes. Such tensions persist despite a raft of legislation, starting with the Employment Relations Act 1999, designed to enable people to better combine paid work with family life. Current proposals requiring lone parents to seek paid employment when their youngest child reaches seven are set to exacerbate this tension.

Prevention versus crisis intervention

The question of whether services should take a preventative approach or focus on crisis intervention has been an enduring debate over the past two decades. The Children Act 1989 was clear that the state has a responsibility to offer services and its definition of children 'in need' enabled local authorities, theoretically at least, to work with a wide range of children whose needs prevented them from realising their full potential. In reality, however, the squeeze on public expenditure during this period meant that it was almost impossible for local authorities to move away from the provision of acute interventions and towards support and prevention. At best services were targeted at the higher end of prevention, whereas children who were considered to have low level or temporary needs were left without a service.

Proponents of prevention were provided with renewed impetus in the mid-1990s, as policy makers gained a better understanding of the impact of disadvantage, and social exclusion became part of the lexicon. The Commission on Social Justice (which reported in 1994 and was credited with influencing much of the Labour Government's first-term thinking) and the creation in 1997 of the Social Exclusion Unit, emphasised the commitment to tackling such issues, and to developing 'joined-up government' across social policy. As well as underlining the new government's commitment to preventative services, the creation of 18 Policy Action Teams, each charged with developing a series of evidence-based policy recommendations, signalled the pace of policy change that would come to characterise the Labour administration.

The prevention agenda was given a major boost with the creation of the Children's Fund in 2000; the Fund has allocated £960 million in the past eight years to tackling social exclusion through partnerships between the statutory and voluntary sectors. While national evaluation of the fund demonstrates that it has been successful in reaching target groups of children and young people, there has been some criticism of the short timescale available to plan and commission services. In some areas this has been compounded by the lack of prior preventative activity, meaning there was little experience of targeting services in this way.

The launch of the Every Child Matters agenda has transformed the landscape of family support services by creating a much more responsive continuum of support and intervention through personalised services. The stated aim of the programme was transformational change, and policy development has taken place at formidable speed and has been accompanied by an avalanche of guidance and consultation documents. Similarly, there has been a tension between the pressure to transform services within a short timescale and the government's public commitment to implementing evidence-based policy.

An example is the development and rollout of children's trusts; 35 pathfinders were established in 2004 to trial the new arrangements. The independent evaluation of the pathfinders was completed in 2007, yet most areas were expected to have children's trust arrangements in place by 2006. The failure to trial and fully evaluate significant changes has been a persistent weakness in an agenda which, viewed holistically, has provided a necessary and positive overhaul of services working with children and families.

Targeting versus universal services

Too often services targeted at deprived communities risk becoming low-quality services, while high-quality universal services may struggle to reach disadvantaged families who are at greatest risk – including young parents, families with disabled children and some minority ethnic groups.

The creation of Sure Start, the centrepiece of the current government's family policy, attempted to tackle this issue by providing a high-quality universal service that also includes targeted support for those in most need. Launched in 1998, investment has grown to £1.5 billion and, while concerns remain about the effectiveness of some local programmes in reaching those most in need, evidence from the national evaluation demonstrates positive outcomes.

However, the scheme has not been without its critics. A whispering campaign, which culminated around the time of the general election in 2005 and coincided with the Blair Government's quest for a legacy, suggested Sure Start was a failure for allegedly not reaching those families most in need. For a time it looked as though the political pressure to produce new initiatives could signal the downfall of the programme. It now looks as though the threat has subsided, but the episode is a stark reminder of the constant threat of churn in services.

A further, recent dilemma surrounds who services should target – parents or children? Since the Anti-social Behaviour Act reached the statute book in 2003, parents have too often been seen as the cause of social ills ranging from educational underachievement to anti-social behaviour. The negative tone of debate has been fuelled by the recent popularity of primetime TV parenting programmes, fronted by various 'experts', which have focused on the deficiencies of individual parents.

Parents have also been the subject of contradictions between different government departments; while the Department for Children, Schools and Families (and its predecessor the Department for Education and Skills) have produced policies and guidance portraying a positive image of parents as change agents, Home Office policy has cast parents as ineffective carers of uncontrollable children who need to be punished.

Conclusion

The growing interest in family issues, particularly in recent years, has undoubtedly influenced the pace of policy change. New initiatives have come on stream and legislation has been enacted at an unprecedented rate. This prompts questions about whether the pace of change has been too fast and whether sufficient time has been allowed to learn the lessons of what works before moving on to the next initiative. There are also questions about the extent to which frontline staff have been able to keep up with the fast-moving policy landscape.

At times the objectives of different government departments have clashed, ministerial priorities have competed and policy developments have been unpredictable. But when set against the unprecedented investment of recent years, the rolling out of preventative services, and the prominence of family policy among all the main political parties, policy churn could be considered a price worth paying.

Looking towards the future, there is a need for policy and practice to more readily recognise the diversity of family structures, customs and histories that exist today. The Government's recent Think Family agenda – with its emphasis on whole family working, more effective collaboration between adult and children's services, and 'no wrong door' attitude to accessing support – has the potential to positively impact on the delivery of services in the future. However, at present there is no indication as to how these principles will be embedded across services and government departments. Realising the ambition of Think Family will require an outcomes framework similar to that of Every Child Matters – and ideally underpinned by statute.

Endnotes

1. *Supporting families: a consultation document*, Home Office, 4 November 1998
2. Ibid

as long as it takes