

Public Accounts Committee Troubled Families Inquiry Written Evidence Submitted by Family Action

Executive Summary

- We welcome the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into the Troubled Families Programme.
- Family Action's evidence submitted to this inquiry is rooted in our experience of delivering services for the Troubled Families Programme within seven local authorities. Moreover, it draws on our experience of delivering intensive support to families with complex needs across the country for decades. We recognise that any publicly funded programme needs to be able to evidence the impact of the interventions that it is funding. We argue though that the achievement of lasting change for families facing complex difficulties needs to be measured in a sophisticated way. We need to be careful not to equate success or failure with outcome data that covers only an aspect of family life e.g. attendance at school or getting a job.
- Families are by definition complex - they involve different people, different combinations of issues, different life events and stages and different relationships and emotions. "Troubled Families" are inevitably particularly complex families. The suggestion that a Troubled Family can be "turned around" because of an achievement made on just one set of issues impacting on a family diminishes the work that needs to be done within a family to make those achievements possible and sustainable. It also ignores the progress that will have been made in other areas of family life that have just not been counted by available data sets.
- Our evidence therefore attempts to give a broader and perhaps more nuanced analysis of the impact of the Troubled Families Programme using our own data and our own experience of delivering the Programme on the ground.
- We hope that the Public Accounts Committee will consider our evidence when reflecting on whether the Programme has been successful or not.
- We note that many people talk about the Troubled Families Programme as if it is the same thing everywhere it is delivered. We can say quite clearly that it is not.
- In our experience the impact of the Programme has been affected by the length and amount of support that we have been commissioned by different local authorities to deliver to individual families. For example, we have been commissioned to work with families for just 5 months in one local authority and up to 12 months in another. The work we have delivered has also been impacted by the existence or not of complementary services in the local area. Our experience also tells us that the existence of step-down services is important for progress to be sustained once intensive family support delivered through the Programme ends. However, the availability of appropriate step-down services varies by local authority.

- Family Action uses a whole family approach throughout all our services, building on strengths, empowering family members and increasing resilience.
- In our experience the *journey* towards improved outcomes is just as important as the end result. Therefore, we are pleased that Phase Two of the Troubled Families Programme recognises “significant and sustained progress” in its outcomes framework. We think this shows an enhanced understanding of the complexity of family work and the fact that progress needs to be measured across many fronts at the same time.
- The widening of the inclusion criteria in Phase Two to include mental health issues and domestic abuse is also an improvement – these are issues that we see frequently in our work with families with complex needs.
- From our own records the median school attendance of children in “Troubled Families” that we have worked with has improved from 64% to 81% across our services.
- We can provide data by individual local authority where we have provided services e.g. in Newham 33% of families took steps towards employment, 63% reduced offending by 33% and 67% reduced anti-social behaviour by 60% over six months. However, we saw a much broader range of progress made by these families in other areas that were simply not counted by the Troubled Families Programme.
- In Birmingham 64% of children in the families we worked with no longer needed a Child Protection Plan and 43% were no longer a Child in Need.
- We are concerned that the Troubled Families Programme, and with it intensive family support, is starting to slip from view as a public policy priority. Perhaps this is because of the claims made that so many families have already been “turned around” or perhaps it just reflects the challenge of keeping a bright light shining on a policy issue for a long period of time. These days funding for Troubled Families work is more likely to be combined with funding for other work. This may be a lost opportunity. What was brilliant about the Troubled Families Programme was that it focused sharp national attention on the importance of responsive, holistic family support. It required all local authorities across the country to think about this issue at the same time and act on it. It helped to fund organisations like Family Action to work intensively, proactively and effectively with families with complex needs to address their problems irrespective of how narrowly our success might be measured.
- We would urge the PAC to remember that the criteria used to judge the success of the Troubled Families Programme only tells an aspect of the story of the impact of the programme. So much attention has been placed on the outcomes achieved by the Programme itself and not on the underlying value of working intensively with families with complex needs. It is worth listening to those who have actually delivered the work and those who have received and benefitted from Troubled Families services if a more detailed understanding of the impact of intensive family support is desired.

- This in turn might lead to an understanding that a programme like Troubled Families could have a profound impact over a generation if only we took the time to measure its impact properly and stopped looking for instant evidence of success.
- How bold it would be if a Programme like this could exist for a generation in order to fully support all families in need of such intervention. Families with complex needs require an integrated service response. This needs to be reflected over the long term in policy, commissioning and service delivery. At the same time investment in early intervention services is vital - to prevent families from reaching the stage where more costly intensive intervention is required.

Further information

1. Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families by delivering innovative and effective services and practical, emotional and financial support to many of the UK's most vulnerable people. Our work includes help for parents-to-be, parenting and relationship support, nurseries and Children's Centres, home-based family support, emotional health and wellbeing services, mental health services, financial grants programmes and training and consultancy services.
2. We are submitting evidence which is rooted in our experience of delivering services in seven local authorities at different points over the course of the Troubled Families Programme. In January 2014 our Chief Executive, David Holmes CBE, was asked to give oral evidence for the Troubled Families Programme to the Public Accounts Committee as part of the report into Programmes to Help Families Facing Multiple Challenges.
3. Family Action uses a whole family approach throughout all services, building on strengths, empowering family members and increasing resilience. We keep a clear focus on the safety and well-being of children and young people and build relationships with families through persistence, reliability and flexibility. We deliver practical and emotional support to build bridges, win trust and achieve rapid change. However, given the multiple and complex needs of families on the Troubled Families Programme, it is important to be realistic about how much change these families are likely to make in the five to twelve months that we are usually commissioned to work with them. In our experience the journey towards improved outcomes is as important, if not more important than, the achievement of narrow, precisely defined short term outcomes. Showing a parent in their own home over a period of months how to parent better may be more significant in the long term than achieving a specific short term outcome. Helping someone to parent better must at the very least make it less likely that their children will have the same problems as their parents. We have sought to influence the development of the Troubled Families Programme over the past few years as our experience of delivering the Programme on the ground has grown. We have always said that the Payment by Results criteria in Phase One of the Programme were too narrow, although we understand that these criteria were at least easier to measure. It is

- good that Phase Two recognises “significant and sustained progress”, valuing the steps on the journey, not just the outcomes at the end.
4. Phase Two of the Troubled Families Programme is also improved by the changes to the inclusion criteria for families. When we gave evidence to the Public Accounts Committee in January 2014 we argued for broader inclusion criteria, including domestic abuse and mental health, because a significant number of the families referred to us are challenged by these issues – with 32% of parents experiencing mental health issues and 47% of cases with domestic abuse present. This means the Programme now recognises the value of making progress in these areas, and the impact this can have on other outcomes. No family that we work with under the Troubled Families Programme presents with a single problem - all have complex issues. A family’s problems will never be solved simply by addressing one issue on its own – a range of pressing problems need to be tackled at the same time. For a typical family that we work with this may mean tackling a housing issue, household poverty, a parent’s anxiety or depression, family conflict, parenting issues and children’s behaviour at the same time. Reducing family conflict or domestic abuse or improving family mental health or parenting capacity may in practice be much greater indicators of success in family work than helping a child to attend school more often or getting a member of the household into work. That progress may be of course be less easy to measure and evidence.
 5. We value the aim of the Troubled Families Programme to join up services and agencies and can evidence good engagement from families as a result of the relationship they develop with their key worker. Our own data shows that this engagement has led to positive outcomes for the whole family, and children specifically. School attendance has improved across our Troubled Families services, with a median increase from 64% to 81% where education issues were a reason for referral and attendance was less than 85%. In our Birmingham service 64% of the children we work with are no longer on a Child Protection Plan and 43% of children are no longer Child in Need. Our Newham service has seen offending reduced by at least 33% in 63% of cases where families were referred to the Programme because of this offending behaviour. In 67% of the cases where the family was referred because of anti-social behaviour this behaviour was reduced by 60% over a six month period. This service has also supported families to take steps towards employment in 33% of cases.
 6. This case study (names changed for confidentiality) demonstrates our approach and impact when delivering work within the Troubled Families Programme: Amina is a single mum with two sons, Ali and Zayn, and a daughter, Farah. Amina had experienced historical domestic abuse, currently had mental health problems and was unemployed. Her dependency on cannabis and alcohol meant she frequently failed to assert her role as the parent and often managed situations inappropriately. None of the children attended school regularly, and when they did go, punctuality was an issue. Amina’s disagreements with her neighbours had led to anti-social behaviour, and her fragmented relationship with Ali had resulted in

her hitting him during an argument. Ali had his own mental health issues and was at risk of entering the youth justice system due to his prolonged criminality and anti-social behaviour. He was also at risk of and exposed to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) as a result of a friendship with an older male who encouraged him to take drugs, drink alcohol and engage in sexual activity with his 15 year old girlfriend.

7. Our Troubled Families service supported the family for six months. We carried out home visits to address the lack of routine and boundaries within the family. We also explored the wishes and feelings of all the children through sessions in school and at home. This empowered all members of the family to bring about change. We were able to support Amina to reflect on her parenting and alcohol and drug dependent behaviour and the impact it was having on her children and her own physical and mental wellbeing.
8. The service supported Amina to embark in mediation with the housing trust to address the conflict between her and her neighbours. The conflict between Amina and Ali was also addressed in order to improve Ali's emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging. With his agreement Ali was referred to CAMHS, and the issue of his risk of and exposure to CSE was escalated to Children's Services. As the family progressed we used a step-down approach which encouraged Amina to explore and access groups and low cost outings in her local community. Amina was also encouraged to enrol in learning courses to build her own skills and knowledge.
9. To measure the progress of the families within our Troubled Families services we use an evaluation tool called the Family Star Plus. Since 2010, Family Action has used this tool effectively to help engage parents and children in the work they need to do to change family life. It measures and records their progress over time across key aspects of their lives, including:
 - Home and money
 - Boundaries and behaviour
 - Education and learning
 - Social networks
 - Keeping your children safe
 - Your Well-being
 - Physical health
 - Family routine
 - Progress to work
 - Meeting emotional needs
10. Figure 1 shows Amina's family's Family Star Plus chart at two points in time - at the beginning of our work with her family and at the point when our work with her family was ending. Family Star scores are from 1 to 10 with a score of 1-2 signifying a family that is absolutely 'Stuck' in relation to a given area and a

score of 9-10 signifying a family that is 'Self-Reliant' and no longer needs help. It can be seen that as a result of our service intervention the family has improved routines, consistently implemented by Amina, with a positive result on the children's school attendance and punctuality. Greater progress has been made in some areas in comparison with others. Things are not perfect but the family has made measurable progress across a wide range of issues. At the end of our support Ali was engaging more in education, Farah had 93.7% attendance, and Zayn has 96.7% attendance with no lateness by either child. Amina enrolled on a maths and English course to be able to help her children with their homework, as well as to improve her own skills in order to increase her employability.

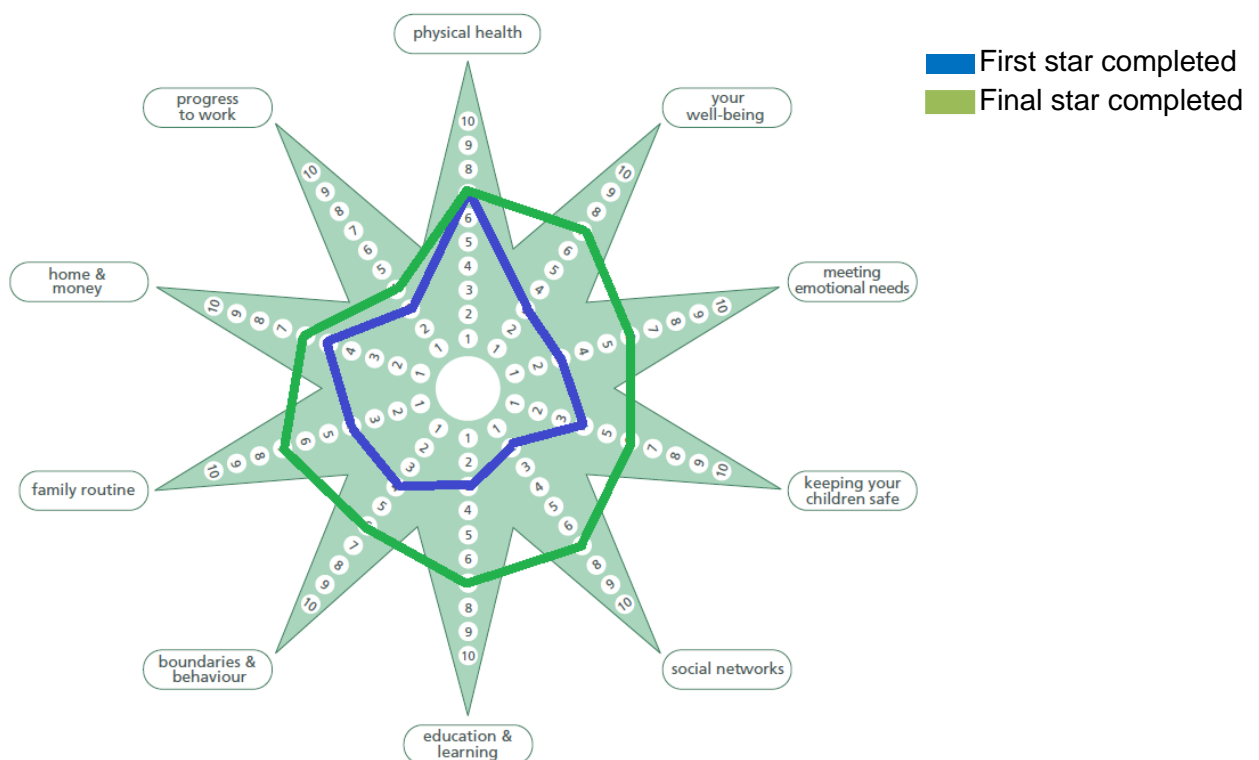


Figure 1: Amina's family's Family Star Plus chart

11. With our support and encouragement, Amina accessed a service that supported her to explore her drug and alcohol dependency. After attending this service Amina abstained from alcohol and drugs. Amina swapped drinking for family time, reading a book with Farah or walking the dog as a family. Amina was showing more interest in Ali, re-affirming his positive behaviour, and managing behavioural issues more consistently. Amina now feels more confident in her parenting role and has improved her ability to keep her children safe. Ali's risk of and exposure to CSE was reduced as a result of this – Amina halted his contact with the older male and when Ali stayed out and failed to return one evening, Amina implemented safeguarding measures, such as contacting the police and informing her allocated social worker. Amina also showed full engagement and commitment to the Child Protection Plan.

12. As a result of accessing family activities and groups in the community the family's social networks have greatly improved. The conflict with their neighbour was resolved and Amina's relationship with them improved, leading Amina to stop her anti-social behaviour.
"I am happy with all the work. We've made really good progress. I wouldn't be where I am today without the support." – Amina
13. Amina and her family show the significant impact that intensive family support can have across a range of different issues within a family. It is why we believe that the Troubled Families Programme, or something like it, with a focus on intensive family support should continue to exist for the long term. This would mean putting intensive work with families front and centre again within social policy.
14. It requires time to truly 'turn around' families with many complex needs. In our experience you need to see progress across many fronts at the same time and not just those which are easier to count or that reflect existing data sets. Complex needs require an integrated response and that needs to be reflected in policy, commissioning and service delivery. Our experience of delivering the Troubled Families programme is that we have been commissioned to deliver significantly different services in different local authorities all under the same Troubled Families banner. The duration of support impacts on the likelihood of achieving significant and sustainable outcomes.
15. Step-down services are required in order to ensure that progress is sustained once the family's intensive support from the Programme ends - it is not sustainable to get a long term unemployed parent back to work after six months without providing further support for them to remain in work. In addition, despite the success of the Troubled Families Programme, it is imperative that early intervention services are also invested in to try to prevent families from reaching the stage where intensive intervention is required.
16. We hope this written evidence is useful and gives some insight into the realities of delivering the Troubled Families programme on the ground from a voluntary sector perspective. We hope we have shown why any consideration of the success or failure of the Troubled Families Programme needs to look beyond the claims about families "turned around" and the high level outcomes data and instead consider the impact achieved at individual family level.