

Hayden, C & Jenkins, C.

‘Troubled Families’ Programme in England: wicked problems and policy based evidence

Abstract

This article outlines and critiques a key area of contemporary social policy in England: the Troubled Families Programme (TFP), launched in 2011. This is a national programme which aims to ‘turn around’ the lives of the 120,000 most troubled families in England by 2015. Troubled families are characterised as those who *have* problems and *cause* problems to those around them. Troubled Families can be viewed as a ‘wicked problem’ in the sense that the issues surrounding these families tend to be reconceptualised regularly and re-solved differently, depending on changes in government. The article critically reviews the evidence base for the overall approach of the programme and the way the scale and nature of the issue is understood. It debates whether this is a case of evidence based policy or policy based evidence. Early indications are that behavioural change is likely to be achieved in some families (increased school attendance, reductions in anti-social behaviour and crime), but that addressing worklessness (a key focus of the programme) presents the biggest challenge. An even bigger challenge is helping families to find work that will move them out of poverty. The article draws on ongoing research in two contrasting local authorities implementing the programme.

Key words: Troubled families, wicked problems, evidence based policy, policy based evidence

Introduction

The 'Troubled Families' Programme (TFP) in England was launched in late 2011 and formally began in April 2012 as a three year initiative (2012-2015), or until the end of the current UK Parliament and Coalition government (NAO 2013). The key objective of the TFP is to 'turn around' the lives of the 120,000 most troubled families (2% of all families) in England over the three year period (DCLG 2013a). These families are believed to have multiple problems but also cause significant problems, and cost the taxpayer an estimated £9 billion a year, or an average of £75,000 per family (DCLG 2013a). These costs come from across government departments, but a key issue is worklessness. Framing TFP in relation to worklessness and high cost is a powerful argument at a time when people in work are facing cuts in their standard of living and public services. This policy framing has the advantage of the appearance of fairness to an assumed majority of 'hard working families' (in popular and political discourse) whilst also justifying cuts in public expenditure and relates to the wider agenda of cutting benefit payments to those who are out of work.

The characterisation and nature of the focus on families with multiple problems changes from time to time and has a long history in social policy. Welshman (2012) presents a useful historical overview (1880s to date) on the reinvention of what he sees as essentially the underclass debate in the UK and US. A debate that in different ways has characterised a social residuum concentrated in particular communities. Prior to the current TFP, policy was already focussed on families: as in Family Intervention Projects, where early schemes were housing-led projects, connecting 'anti-social' behaviour with family based problems (see Parr and Nixon

2008). The social geography of the issue also has a long and well evidenced history (Harvey and Chatterjee 1973), illustrating that social problems (such as worklessness, low educational attainment, substance misuse) are concentrated in particular localities and specifically in social and council housing (Author and Nardone 2012). These social problems are in turn underpinned by poverty, lack of opportunity and mental health issues; as well as behaviours that present contemporary society with a range of challenges in relation to the future of the children in these families (Authors 2013). The current programme in England has a strong emphasis on changing behaviour, rather than material circumstances per se. This follows the way that recent governments in the UK (both New Labour and the Coalition) have been increasingly focussed on behaviour; whilst social scientists have been more concerned with unravelling the relative influences of agency and structure (Welshman 2012,9). Welshman (2012) highlights the importance of addressing both the behavioural and structural causes of poverty. From the outset the troubled families initiative has been criticised for using poverty indicators as the prime way of estimating the number of these families, and thereby associating poverty with anti-social behaviour and criminality (Levitas 2012).

Most societies are likely to have some families with multiple problems. How the problem is conceptualised and understood is important in framing the response. The response needs to consider both underlying driving forces behind a problem (such as increasing inequality) as well as the more immediate issue of how to respond (as in working with the whole family, rather than individual adult and child 'problems'). England is an interesting case study as an advanced industrial society with well documented problems of increasing inequality, which underpins many of our key

social problems, such as 'troubled families'. Other countries in the UK do not name the focus of their work as 'troubled' families and have a stronger emphasis on reducing poverty. Increased high profile popular (Minton Beddoes 2012; Kerry 2014) and academic debate in a number of disciplines (Pickett and Wilkinson 2007; Eckenrode et al 2014) about the pernicious effects of inequality are of global concern. There is also well documented research about the need to understand and respond to families as a whole more effectively (Kendall, Rodger and Palmer 2010). The evolving 'troubled' families programme in England can inform these debates.

The August 2011 riots in England helped to create additional impetus behind the launch of the Coalition government response in the form of the TFP. Poor parenting was viewed as a causal factor of the riots, situated within a popular and political discourse about a broader social and cultural malaise (Bristow 2013); represented in the pre-election Conservative party rhetoric as "*Broken Britain*" (Gentleman 2010). Several agendas have shaped the way the TFP was launched and is developing. These include the belief that a small number of families are responsible for disproportionate costs in public sector services; and, that services provided to these families are poorly co-ordinated, too numerous and largely ineffective. It follows that better co-ordination; fewer and more effective services will not only save costs, but should also do a better job of enabling families to address their problems (Cameron 2011; DCLG 2012a). It is interesting to note that, the TFP is a non-statutory intervention, families are asked to sign up to the programme, rather than being told that they must accept the help. However, such families may be facing other types of more coercive response at the same time, such as a threat of eviction or prosecution because of persistent absence from school. So signing up to the programme is not

totally voluntary nor is it totally coercive, despite some of the tough talking from politicians early on in the programme. The semi-voluntary nature of the programme is both an advantage of the TFP but also an inherent tension. For example, child welfare concerns are likely to be present in many of the households (see local criteria for the programme and research evidence in this article) and statutory services (such as social services) may have to become involved in some cases. Hence in some ways the TFP is another way of delivering state services to families with multiple problems that may initially bypass social services and other types of statutory intervention. This may make the service more acceptable to some families. The focus on the whole family, rather than individual people is often heralded as a relatively new way of delivering services in the UK, but actually has a long history in relation to social work with children and families going back to the 1960s in the UK and US. Thoburn et al (2013, 228-229) note the increased focus in social work in the UK on child maltreatment after the 1989 Children Act, despite “*a bewildering array*” of government (and part government) initiatives targeted at “*families with complex problems*”.

Cuts in public expenditure are central to the policies of the 2010 Coalition government in the UK, so the creation of an apparently new area of central government expenditure (£448 million, for distribution to the 152 upper tier authorities in England) is perhaps surprising. One view is that this is not really new expenditure, but recycled cuts, repackaged as an investment expected to lead to savings. Central government expects (but cannot require) local authorities to contribute the equivalent of £600 million of their own resources over the three year period. Central and local government investment combined leads to a potential

overall investment of just over £1 billion (£448 plus 600 million). The possible savings have been estimated at £2.7 billion (NAO 2013). These savings are expected to come about through more co-ordinated services and through a focus on key outcomes relating to the national criteria for the programme. The three national criteria are: reductions in worklessness, crime and anti-social behaviour, and increased school attendance. A fourth national criterion relates simply to families who “*cause high costs to the public purse*” (DCLG 2012a, 3).

The resources for the TFP have been created by top-slicing the budgets of several central government departments: Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Department for Education (DfE), Home Office (HO), Department for Health (DoH), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). This demonstrates the extent to which the TFP is seen as a cross departmental initiative and national priority. Central government expects (but cannot require) local authorities to contribute the equivalent of £600 million of their own resources over the three year period, leading to a potential overall investment of £1,048 million. The programme is underpinned by a payment-by-results (PBR) framework (DCLG 2012a) in which local authorities get an attachment fee for every family who joins the programme and an outcome payment under PBR for achieving the changes required by the three national criteria (noted above). The attachment fee reduces year on year and so the relative importance of PBR increases (NAO 2013, 15).

This paper focuses on the development and testing phase of the TFP in England, which in essence concentrates on an enduring and complex social problem: complex

families with multiple problems. Such problems have been referred to as “*wicked problems*” that tend to be “*re-solved – over and over again*”, rather than solved, as in “*tame*” or “*benign*” problems in some areas of natural science (Rittel and Webber 1973, 160). The paper covers four main themes. Firstly, a critical analysis of the conceptualisation of ‘troubled families’ and the scale, nature and extent of the problem so identified. Secondly, an outline of the antecedents to this programme and the evidence base for the current style of intervention. Thirdly, a review of early evidence about how the programme is developing, drawing on observations and data from ongoing research in two contrasting local TFPs. The paper concludes with a consideration of the lessons about policy implementation and the TFP, with reference to debates about evidence based policy in contrast with policy-based evidence (see Gregg 2010).

Conceptualising the ‘wicked’ problem of ‘Troubled Families’

‘Troubled Families’ is a contested, indeed a troublesome term. It is a term very much associated with England; other countries in the UK use different terminology and have a stronger focus on intensive support for complex families and action to reduce poverty (see links within DCLG 2013a). Further, it is debatable whether there is a programme as such; and, whether instead this policy focus ought to be seen as a way of describing the desire to reframe and reprioritise the response of the state to a range of inter-connected and persistent family-based welfare problems (‘wicked problems’, Rittel and Webber 1973). Whether these problems are primarily understood to be a result of social and economic disadvantage and marginalisation, or individual fecklessness and irresponsibility, is a long running debate.

Welshman (2012) views this policy focus as the latest in at least eight major reconstructions of the underclass debate in the United Kingdom and the United States (dating from 1880 to the present day). Welshman (2012) argues that whilst the UK government talks about history repeating itself through the intergenerational transmission of these problems “*the history that has really repeated itself is that of a flawed discourse*” (para. 16). Welshman (2012) argues that the debate is flawed because of the way such family problems are defined, the misdirected effort that goes into identifying and counting people that meet definitions; and, the way the interventions that follow largely ignore the structural causes of poverty and worklessness (para. 17). This debate about a problematic minority of families (often seen as an ‘underclass’) is frequently taken up by politicians keen to make their mark in an area of significant public expenditure.

There is a broad political consensus in the UK about the existence of a minority of families with multiple problems (see NAO 2013); but the scale of the issue depends on how the issues are conceptualized, which families are the focus and why. This differs across the political spectrum (and by country, as already noted above). After the riots a cross party initiative, the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (RCVP 2012) conducted a wide ranging consultation and investigation into the causes of the riots. The report of this panel was keen to differentiate between ‘rioter families’ as primarily trouble-making, the emerging TFP and a much bigger group that they referred to as forgotten families:

.....our evidence suggests that a significant connection between TFP families and the families of the rioters has not yet been established. Instead,

public services describe a group of approximately 500,000 'forgotten families' who 'bump along the bottom' of society (RCVP 2012, 6).

Bumping along the bottom of society can be read in part as a euphemism for poverty and marginalisation. Reducing child poverty is widely recognised to be a key aspect of any attempt to improve child welfare and well-being (Fauth, Renton and Soloman 2013). Although child poverty is a global problem it is well established that indicators of child well-being are more strongly associated with income inequality, rather than median income and relative poverty per se in rich countries (Pickett and Wilkinson 2007). Material circumstances matter in relation to the way that adults are able to parent, what has been referred to as "*the permitted circumstances of parenting*" (Rutter in Author 2007, 63).

Available evidence suggests that relative poverty and living in social or rented housing underpins the circumstances of many troubled families (Authors 2013). However, these two circumstances are very widespread and do not in and of themselves necessarily lead to multiple problems. All countries of the UK are committed to reducing (and ultimately eradicating) child poverty and there is a growing debate about the social harms associated with inequality. At the same time a major reform of the benefits system is underway based on the principle that no family out of work should be better off than a family in work. Getting families off benefits and into work has been central to initiatives aimed at reducing child poverty, despite the evidence that many poor families are in work (Newman 2011). The relative success of these initiatives has been very uneven (as are the economic opportunities in different parts of the UK). For example, Scotland has the lowest level

of child poverty in the UK and areas of Wales have some of the highest levels (SMCPC 2013).

The estimate of 120,000 troubled families is said to have come from data from the 2005 Family and Children Survey, FACS (Levitas 2012). The measures used to identify the 120,000 families include the following seven criteria. To be designated 'troubled', families had to meet five of the seven criteria below:

- No parent in the family is in work
- The family lives in overcrowded housing
- No parent has any qualifications
- The mother has mental health problems
- At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity
- The family has a low income (below 60% of median income)
- The family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items

(Levitas 2012, 4-5).

The FACS data was then modelled to create the estimated number by local authority using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (see DCLG 2012a for more details), thereby acknowledging the relative poverty and disadvantage that underpins the living circumstances of most families characterized as 'troubled'. Several of the FACS criteria also clearly relate to relative poverty. However, one of the key national criteria for the TFP (see below) - crime and anti-social behavior (ASB) - was not included in the 2005 survey. Worklessness is there ('no family member in work') as are educational issues ('no parent has any qualifications') but not school attendance specifically. So at the start of the programme some major assumptions were made

about the extent to which crime and ASB overlap with worklessness, educational achievement (and specifically attendance at school) and multiple deprivation. Illness, disability and infirmity do not get a mention in the national criteria and payment-by-results framework. Although mental health was recognized later in the 'local criteria' allowed by the TFP (see below), as the programme has since developed.

In practical terms local authorities have had a very time consuming job of drawing up a list of families to fit the likely number modelled by government to a set of national and local criteria. National criteria for the TFP include, households who:

- Are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour
- Have children not in school
- Have an adult on out of work benefits (ie 'workless')
- Cause high costs to the public purse (DCLG 2012b,3).

Any family that meets the first three national criteria should automatically be part of the programme. The fourth category was put forward after the programme was launched to allow local discretion in relation to using additional criteria to include families that a local authority is concerned about (and represent a high cost to the public purse). Other local discretionary criteria include wide ranging social welfare problems, as well as criminal justice issues:

- Families with a child on a Child Protection Plan or likely to be 'Looked After' by the state.

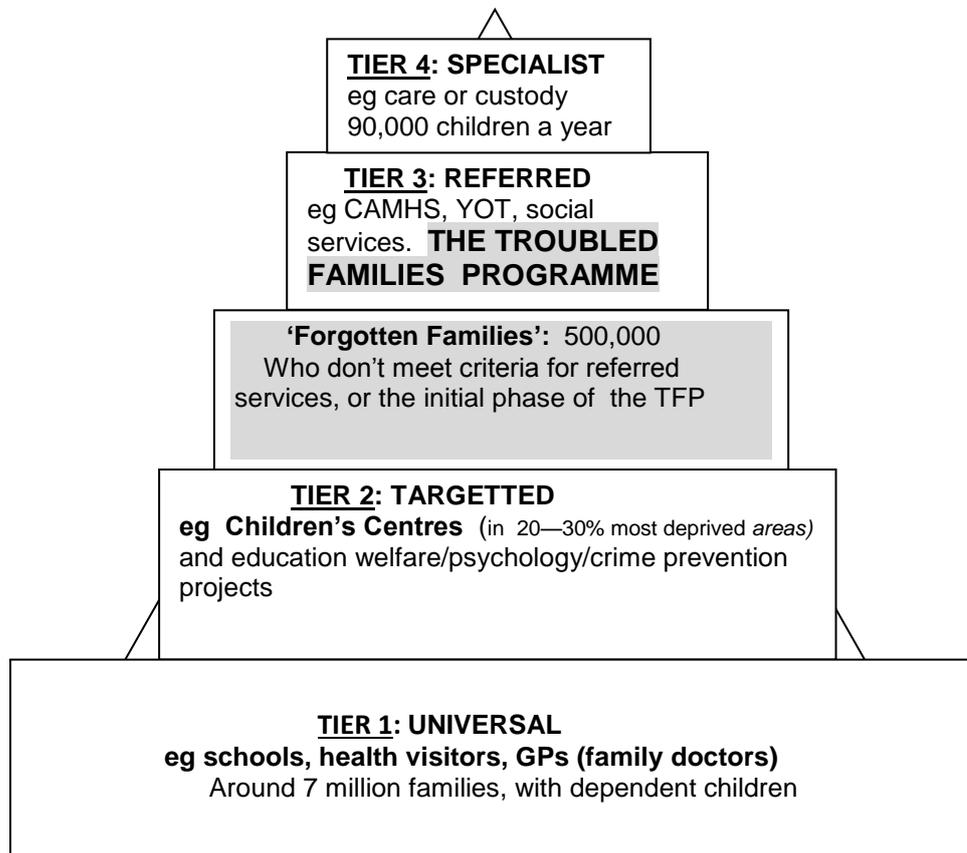
- Families with frequent police call-outs or arrests or proven offenders (eg individuals who have been in prison; prolific or priority offenders; those who are gang involved).
- Families with health problems (eg emotional and mental health; drug and alcohol misuse; problems caused by domestic abuse; under 18 conceptions) (DCLG 2012b, 5).

As we noted earlier the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (RCVP 2012) identified another group of families they referred to as ‘the forgotten families’ who do not quite meet the threshold criteria for access to referred services, such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Services for children and families in the UK are conceptualised in relation to ‘tiers’ of increasing intensity of problem, professional intervention and cost, illustrated in Figure 1 (see C4EO 2011). The TFP is essentially focussed in Tier 3 (referred services) with a strong focus on keeping children at home and out of Tier 4 services, such as care and custody (see the Authors 2013).

Figure 1 (overleaf) locates ‘forgotten families’ between the early intervention initiatives (Tier 2, such as Children’s Centres that developed out of the Sure Start Programme (see Lewis 2011) and the current programme for troubled families (Tier 3). The focus of the TFP is primarily on teenagers and adults (although younger children will inevitably be part of some families) who meet the criteria for a referred service. To be fair the gap (referred to by the RCVP as the ‘forgotten families’) has now been acknowledged in the plans to extend the programme to another 400,000 ‘high risk’ households in 2015/16 (HM Treasury 2013). Indeed the 2014 Budget

announced that the expansion of the programme should start before 2015 (Hayes 2014).

Figure 1: Tiered Services - ‘Troubled Families’ and ‘Forgotten Families’



Existing evidence and theoretical base

Notwithstanding the above critique of the way the issue has been conceptualised by the Coalition government in the UK, there is a developing evidence base to support the broader parameters and ways of working with families promoted by the developing TFP. However, some evidence is by-passed or ignored if it is inconvenient, such as the obvious difficulties in tackling worklessness in these families (see also Newman 2011, 92) as already illustrated in the national monitoring data (see DCLG 2013b).

The government review of the evidence base characterises the 'family intervention factor' as having five key components:

A dedicated worker, dedicated to the family

Practical 'hands on' support

A persistent, assertive and challenging approach

Considering the family as a whole – gathering the intelligence

Having a common purpose and agreed action (DCLG 2012b, 6).

This DCLG review recognises the limitations to the evidence base, particularly the lack of control (or comparison) groups in most studies but asserts that the evidence is nevertheless consistently strong and compelling (DCLG 2012b, 6). Three basic models of working in the TFP are advocated, with decreasing levels of intensity:

Family Intervention: larger, most challenging and complex families, caseloads of up to 5 families

Family Intervention light: smaller families and/or fewer needs, caseloads 5-15 families

Family Intervention super light: 'lead worker' based in and working from an existing service (DCLG 2012b, 31-32).

Dixon et al (2010, 11) in reviewing the evidence on the approach of Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) state:

All intensive family interventions work in a similar way, taking an assertive and persistent yet supportive approach to addressing and challenging the issues

facing the whole family which ensures that they recognise the interconnectedness between children's and adults' problems. Following a rigorous assessment a key worker is assigned to work intensively with each family, building a close and trusting relationship.

FIPs developed as part of New Labour's anti-social behaviour strategy and continue as part of the TFP in some areas (or sometimes alongside local programmes). A key part of the research evidence that originally supported the development of FIPs came from the Dundee Family Project in Scotland (see Dillane et al 2001 for more details). Starting in 1995 this project focussed on tenants who faced eviction, the so-called neighbours from hell in popular and political discourse in the UK, as part of the ascendancy of anti-social behaviour as a catch-all phrase for all kinds of incivilities and nuisance, as well as criminal behaviour (see for example, Squires, 2008). The key features of the original Dundee approach were: an assertive worker for each family, the availability of 24-hour support and housing in supported residential facilities for a small number of families. Families signed a contract that gave them a mixture of support and challenge, with sanctions (such as eviction) if they refused help (DCLG 2012b, 11).

However, Gregg (2010) has provided a useful critique of the evidence base for FIPs arguing that it is a classic case of "*policy-based evidence*". Gregg's (2010) arguments centre on both the way that the families receiving this help have been constructed, how some needs are not met because of this, the misleading use of research evidence, and the remarkable claims in government press releases about families 'turned around'. The latter criticisms are all equally relevant to and

replicated by the TFP. An important part of Gregg's (2010) critique relates to the political use of research evidence on outcomes in relation to FIP's. Gregg (2010, 16) concludes that:

The FIP was an interesting social engineering experiment which had the potential to help poor, very vulnerable families who failed to fit in to their communities. Instead FIPs were marketed as a way of punishing 'families from hell'.

Further criticism of the use (and misuse) of the existing research evidence has also come from Fletcher et al (2012, 1) who assert that "*a systematic review commissioned for the previous government found no studies to support the claim that such interventions improve outcomes for families*". The review focussed on interventions to improve the coordination of service delivery to "*high cost high harm household units*". However, a closer reading of this review (see Newman et al 2007, 2) indicates that positive effects were found in relation to school attendance and self-reported anti-social and delinquent behaviour and that "*clients perceive such interventions as acceptable*". Parr (2011, 732) argues that her interviews with women in receipt of intensive family support illustrate that they seemed to want, need and appreciate the support that they had. Furthermore the support was said to be "*largely non-stigmatising and sensitive*", and was important in improving their quality of life. All of which indicates that it depends what outcomes you are looking for when assessing the research evidence; and, what types of evidence count in reaching a conclusion.

At the time of writing the independent research on what the current TFP is actually doing is limited and the government commissioned national evaluation is not expected to report on the first phase of their work (a mapping exercise on the responses of the 152 local authorities across England) until late 2014. Some indication comes from programme organisational reports such as the South East Strategic Leaders (SESL 2013, 2) who describe the developing programme as:

...much more than an initiative – it stands for a new ethos of public sector delivery, of collaborative working and systemic change.

SESL (2013,2) note that the programme exists in many guises across the 15 local authorities represented by their report, then goes on to list a range of names the services are given (with none being named a Troubled Families Programme): 'Families First', 'Turnaround Families', 'Think Family', 'Strengthening Families', 'Family Focus' and 'Thriving Families.' How these 15 local authorities present what they are doing differently encompasses whole system redesign, enhanced and new forms of collaboration, as well as holistic and targeted work with families. The specific ways of working and services that are included are wide ranging, for example: peer support, family group conferences and other restorative approaches. Various forms of family support teams and key worker models operate within a pragmatic and responsive framework. Some programmes include evidence based approaches such as the Triple P parenting programme (Sanders 2008). In one of the local authorities in our research, Multi Systemic Therapy (see Welsh and Farrington 2006) is the most intensive part of the local programme.

Some kind of differentiation within programmes (in line with the DCLG 2012b evidence base) seems to be common: based on intensity of intervention and size of caseloads, with the least intensive work being incorporated into the role of the lead professional working within their existing service, alongside their existing duties. In 2013 the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) seconded practitioners to programmes to focus on the worklessness aspect. This latter work is aligned with European Social Fund (ESF) initiatives in many areas, which also focus on worklessness and are connected to the TFP (DWP 2013). Half way through the three year programme (November 2013), the government claimed that 92,000 families (of the 120,000) had been identified, 62,000 were being 'worked with' and 22,000 families (24% of those 'worked with') had been 'turned around' (DCLG 2013b). Key outcome (and output) data on all local authorities is publicly available. We apply this national monitoring data to our two case studies of local programmes in the next section (see Table 1).

Case studies of two local programmes: early observations

What we present next is from ongoing research in two local TFPs in very different local authorities in England (a relatively deprived city authority and a large shire county). The county includes many areas of affluence, as well as major areas of deprivation. The research for the two programmes is multi-method: observations, secondary data analysis of family profiles and programme outcomes, staff surveys and interviews, family case studies.

In the current article we draw on our observations of how these two local programmes are developing (from participation in steering groups) the perspectives of staff working in the programmes (from 10 in-depth interviews, a survey of over 100

staff, and 5 focus groups), as well as comparative secondary data – including outputs and outcomes to date. The themes we cover include: comparison of secondary data on the two programmes (Table 1), staff concerns about the term ‘troubled family’ and how the issues that are the focus of the programme are understood, professional perspectives on problem construction and solutions, and recognition of the need for systemic change in work with families who have multiple problems.

Table 1 (overleaf) illustrates the different circumstances, approaches and number of families in the two local programmes. By around the mid-point (November 2013) of the three year programme, the city local authority (LA1) had found more families than the expected number (from the data modelled by the government) and the shire county local authority (LA2) had identified three-quarters of their families. We have estimated the number of ‘forgotten families’ in each local authority as those who meet one individual national criteria, minus those who do meet the programme definition of a ‘troubled family’ (two or more national criteria). This illustrates the very large potential pool of families that might benefit from the kind of help the programme provides. Comparison between the two local authorities illustrates the different types of response, with only one of the programmes using an evidence-based programmatic intervention, Multi Systemic Therapy (MST) with the most complex families, and a Family Group Conference (FGC) trial with less complex families. It is interesting to note the different local criteria chosen, although both local authorities include domestic abuse. Local priorities highlight the issue of how the nature of the problems in ‘troubled families’ can be conceptualised and prioritised.

Table 1: Comparing the response in two local programmes*

	Local authority 1 (LA1)	Local authority 2 (LA2)
Type of local authority	City	County
Total population	200,000	1,300,000
Deprivation	Relatively poor, but with some areas of affluence	Relatively affluent, with areas of poverty
Expected number of troubled families (from Govt data)	560*	1,600*
Number of families identified by each local authority (by year 2)	720	1,240
Type of services	<i>3 levels -all services are city-wide:</i> -Most intensive: Multi-Systemic Therapy (125 families) -FIP (380 families) - Existing services and lead professional (220 families) FGC trial with FIP and existing services (2014)	<i>2 levels – ‘most intensive’ is county wide, others by area:</i> - Most intensive, from a consortium of agencies and existing FIPs (500 families) -‘Locally determined solutions’ – 10 local co-ordination groups, existing services and lead professional (1,100 families)
Local criteria	<i>All are city-wide:</i> Child in need Child Protection Domestic abuse Substance misuse	<i>All 10 areas in the county:</i> Mental health Domestic abuse <i>In some areas:</i> home schooling; substance misuse; behavioural problems
Meets all 3 national criteria	170	<i>Data not available at local authority level</i>
Meets 2 national and one local criteria	550	900
Estimate of ‘forgotten families’	2,430 <i>(based on all families meeting one individual criteria - minus those meeting 2 or 3, as in the above two categories)</i>	3,700 <i>(based on all families meeting one of the two national criteria: offending or education – minus those in the above category of meeting two national + 1 local criteria)</i>
Key outputs and outcomes mid-point of programme**:		
-% of families ‘worked with’	49.9%	40.0%
-% achieved outcomes on national criteria	19.5%	28.9%
-% ‘turned around’	9.7%	13.6%
-Number making ‘progress to work’	7	5
-Number ‘in continuous employment’	0	33

*All local authority figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 or 100 to reduce the possibility that the local authorities are identifiable

**Outcomes and output data from DCLG (2013b)

Mid-point outputs and outcomes (November 2013) in Table 1 show modest claims on families 'turned around' (LA1: 9.7%; LA2: 13.6%, compared with 24% nationally). Why there is such a big difference between our case study local authorities and the national average of families 'turned around' is difficult to say. The proportion achieving outcomes on the crime/ASB and education national criteria is also smaller than the national average (LA1: 19.5%; LA2: 28.9%, compared with 33% nationally). The number making 'progress to work' is so small (LA1: 7; LA2: 5) that the figures are given in numbers, rather than percentages - with no family 'in continuous employment' as a result of the programme in LA1 and 33 in LA2. Nationally 2.3% of families have found continuous employment (DCLG 2013 b).

Both local programmes in our research are critical of the language and associations of the TFP and (in common with the 15 local authorities in the SESL 2013, report and those attending a national symposium PPE, 2014) neither local programme clearly identifies itself as part of the national TFP in relation to how it presents itself to service users. A view encapsulated in the following quote from a professional working within one of the programmes:

We certainly wouldn't use the word 'troubled families'. [the information] says something about supporting families but there is a problem because obviously the [local authority] still refer to troubled families....., so that language does infiltrate a little bit.

Another interviewee agreed that the language was a problem but also observed that:

Most of these families are not surprised that they're on another list. They're on so many lists already. That's another one. And I don't think that these families are naïve enough to not recognise the undercurrent of wording. It doesn't matter what the title is.

On the other hand a senior manager in one of our local programmes told us that the language of the national programme had led to them losing the building they were going to rent to house the service because the landlord “*didn't want those sorts of families in his building.*” There were practical problems in the avoidance of using the term ‘troubled families’ in the name of operational programmes, to the extent that in the first year we found that a minority of staff working within both programmes did not recognise that they were part of the TFP (although they were organisationally).

Some interviewees were keen to differentiate between what they saw as the ‘root cause’ of the problems troubled families faced and the pragmatics of responding to the effects of their problems; as well as creating services that these families would use. It is interesting to compare the root causes below with the national and local programme criteria in Table 1.

...the root causes I would say are high unemployment, low income, the class system, the lack of opportunities..... Dealing with the effects if they're not going to deal with the root causes, I think it is about.... getting services in there, the services that families are willing to access, and I think that's the crucial key.

Others acknowledged that poverty underpins the situation in which families had multiple problems, but felt that this was not necessarily the root cause:

...it comes back to how you define the problem, doesn't it? And right from the start I'm not sure we're defining the problem right. Is the problem about poverty? To some extent it is, but then not everyone living in poverty is creating the same kind of problem that other people are.And for me it's about aspiration and resourcefulness.

So there was some level of agreement that poverty and worklessness were part of the issue, but that these issues did not fully explain the behaviour and situations troubled families were in.

There was, however, general agreement that focussed and intensive 1:1 support for families; by skilled professionals with small caseloads was a well evidenced and appropriate way of working. A strong theme in interviews was that 'who works' (the quality of the individual professional and their ability to make relationships with families) was more important than 'what works' (programmatic approaches). This emphasis was also very evident in a national symposium (PPE 2014). But there was support for the FIP model of working and many practitioners had clearly heard of the Dundee research mentioned earlier (see Dillane et al 2001):

The FIP model does suggest that...you keep the consistent approach, the persistent approach...It's finding that one little thing, that one inroad and our

silos systems can't do that, don't have the time for that. But if you're working within the FIP model you make time for that because that is your inroad and once you've got that and you've established that, then you can carry on and do some work.

Consistency and persistence, coupled with listening to what families said they wanted and needed was viewed as of key importance. These themes are illustrated in the following quote:

....we listen to what families say, children say, young people say...what they don't want is to keep having to tell their story time and time again to other people.....What they want is actually someone who can be consistent and a bit tough so that they don't let go of them, so they can't duck and dive. Because it's hard for them to keep that... it's difficult but if they can keep that relationship with somebody the difference it can make to them in terms of themselves is huge.

In both our local programmes, staff generally recognised that the way services work with families, needs to change. The changes needed were recognised to be significant:

...it's not about doing what we've done before. This is rebooting the computer, a fresh look...

With professionals changing how they worked and what they did to help families:

It's not about doing things better it's about doing better things.

The fact that the TFP really did bring in agencies from across government departments and involved a range of third sector agencies was an exciting opportunity for many staff:

...as far as we're concerned, I think the partnership working and information sharing and working together worked well previously, but the extra partners that this programme brings to the table, schools, DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] as well, we've never had so much information, and to utilise it to the benefit of a certain programme. At the end of the day what I want it to be about is that information sharing, but also then working efficiently and saving resources and time from agencies, but making a real difference.

Managers of our local programmes were approaching the overall need for systemic change, in how they worked with complex families differently. The City (LA1) employed consultants to undertake a systems review on existing ways of working, followed by a trial in new ways of working. The County (LA2) gave a budget to the different areas within the local authority with a lead officer (from varied professional backgrounds eg teaching, social work, community safety, local authority management, community health professionals) tasked to bring together a local group of people who would help develop 'locally determined solutions' for the families identified in their locality. Both approaches were based on the belief that existing ways of working need to change. The mantra in one of the programmes in our research is that "*troubled families is everybody's core business*" or "*part of their day*

job". This is an interesting assertion that fits better with the priority of some agencies and geographical locations than others. For example, the circumstances of troubled families overlap strongly with the work of social services. The social geography of troubled families affects services, such as state schools, differentially. For schools in poorer areas troubled families are a major part of their 'core business'; whereas schools in affluent areas may not see so many families in this situation and may not prioritise their needs to the same extent. For example the number of troubled families across the local areas in our shire county case study (LA2) ranged from under 20 to over 90.

As we noted earlier, relative poverty and living in social housing is what many families in both our local programmes have in common. Beyond that (and the national criteria) there is a complex mixture of major issues affecting families that include: domestic abuse, mental health and substance misuse. Other issues include housing conditions, debt, learning disability, potentially dangerous dogs and so on. The complexity of family situations is captured in the three examples below (described by their key worker in each case):

Mum has £40,000 debt, is concerned her ex-partner will shortly be released from prison, the children had 0% attendance for four weeks of this school term, mum was on medication for her mental health and disclosed she was pregnant, the house had been wrecked whilst she was in Italy and there were a number of complaints made to the housing association with regards to noise, and the dogs.

[the mother] *has long term health problems and has a bed in the sitting room, so [she] was sitting on the bed when I arrived. I met everybody and they made me very welcome. [The housing service worker] had expressed concerns to me over the conditions in the home.*

[the son] *and [mother] have moderate learning disabilities and [the son's] attendance at school was not high; [the two older sons], with some involvement of [the third son] had issues with anti-social behaviour. At the time of the introduction, [the two oldest sons, who also have children of their own] weren't living there, and consequently I didn't meet them on this occasion. One son was living at the address, but the week after this had changed. The house was in a state of disrepair and quite dirty; though they had obviously tidied up and made an effort for my visit. They also have 3 dogs, which have pack mentality and have quite vicious fights.*

The initial response to cases like this usually started with tackling the most urgent need, such as avoiding eviction and helping the family to tidy up the home and keep dogs under control and away from children. Then it became more possible to focus on issues such as getting children back into school. In the face of such adversity the idea that families can be 'turned around' (as opposed to being 'kept afloat') is clearly political rhetoric (see also Gregg 2010 in relation to FIPs). That said both local programmes could claim some successes (as evidenced in Table 1), both through the PBR framework and more broadly through their own assessment of changes that families had been able to make outside this framework and the crises (such as eviction and homelessness) that had been averted.

Practitioners working with families in both local programmes emphasise the amount of effort that can be required to get access to and gain the trust of families in such difficulty. The great majority of families in our two local programmes have already had multiple types of support and statutory intervention before they had help from the TFP. For example, an in-depth review of the evidence on referrals to social services on 49 families in one of our local programmes revealed that 36 families (73.5%) were already known to social services *before* they were part of the TFP; and 12 more families (48, 98%) became known to social services *after* referral to the TFP. Furthermore, nearly a third (16, 32.7%) of the parents in these 49 families had clear evidence of being involved with social services as a child.

Evidence based policy or policy-based evidence?

Despite our criticisms, there are good reasons to support the practical aspects of an initiative that is helping some of England's families with multiple problems avert a crisis (such as eviction), deal with practical problems (such as morning routines and getting children to school), as well as help them make broader positive changes in their relationships with each other and their communities. That said, it is important to maintain a critical eye on the more outlandish claims made about the programme by politicians. Clearly the programme was initially driven by national political priorities, in a context of economic crisis and riots; but (as we noted earlier) the TFP is developing to be much more than this. We conclude this article with a consideration of whether the TFP is an *evidence-based programme*, or a case of *policy-based evidence*.

Boden and Epstein (2006, 226) have argued that evidence-based government commissioned evaluations are fundamentally flawed by the fact that Government, in its broadest sense, seeks to capture and control the knowledge producing processes to the point where research becomes “*policy-based evidence*”. This is essentially the same argument (referred to earlier) that Gregg (2010) applied to the evidence base and FIPs. The TFP can be seen as based partly on research evidence, albeit not with comparison or control groups. The broad approach - the family intervention factor, some aspects of the conclusions reached by Newman et al (2007) and specific interventions such as MST are all promising. Yet in some important respects the TFP is also a case of policy-based evidence. The problem (troubled families) was in part constructed to fit political priorities near the start of a new government, with a focus that initially ignored the child welfare, social and health issues associated with the national criteria set for the TFP (worklessness, school attendance, crime and ASB). Furthermore, the national priority of getting families back into work has not sufficiently acknowledged the very considerable barriers that families face (such as health problems, childcare needs and so on) alongside the more obvious issue of work availability. Troubled families are complex families with an array of problems and issues that are not easily solved. They represent a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel and Webber 1973) and the TFP is the latest attempt to re-solve it. The question is, do we agree what the problem is? The differences between the national and local criteria tend to suggest that there is an important difference in emphasis in problem construction, between national and local government.

On a more positive note, the TFP is offering a framework for innovation with some initial start-up funding from central government; and, the promise of continued

funding beyond 2015 and into the spending plans of at least the first year of the next government. It is clear that the results of research would generally support more coordinated and joined-up professional work with families with multiple problems (see Author 2007, 23-26). It can be argued that the way agencies have worked with these families often mirrors the complexity found in their lives (DCLG 2012d). Although the original focus on national criteria was flawed (as evidenced by the difficulty in finding enough families to meet the original three national criteria of worklessness *and* criminal and anti-social behaviour *and* very poor school attendance); allowing local criteria has legitimized the inclusion of a wider range of welfare based criteria. The requirement to monitor and evidence 'success' in order to receive resources, under the payment-by-results aspect of the programme has sharpened up the desire to focus on success, the sharing of good practice and in some cases it is leading to the use of evidence-based programmes. The latter is not the norm however, it is more common to mix and match elements of ways of working that are relatively well evidenced, but in a flexible way.

Barth et al (2012) note the slow uptake of 'manualized' evidence-based programmes in social work and advise that a *common factors* and *common elements* (as aspects of practices and protocols) framework can be complementary to evidence-based programmes. They highlight key examples of 'common factors' in all therapeutic interventions as: the personal qualities of the therapist and their relationship with the client ('who works') and the motivation, hopes and expectations of the client, regardless of the intervention itself. In general these common factors have been well recognized in the way local troubled families programmes have been set up. So, this is why the article queries at the beginning whether there is a

Troubled Families *Programme*; as opposed to a focus on an identifiable and interconnected group of issues which cut across different government departments. In essence, the TFP is the latest iteration of approaches to the 'wicked problem' of how to help complex families with multiple problems. In that sense it is highly unlikely to be pronounced an unqualified success by researchers, in contrast to the amazing claims made by politicians; but there are some promising aspects to the TFP.

What our research in two local programmes illustrates is a desire to do things differently and to pull together to make a difference with these families. The common elements to the way TFP is operating are: having an identifiable coordinating professional, as support or key worker for each family, seeing the family as a whole (rather than a collection of individual adult and child problems), and having a plan for change with the family. Available evidence (our current research; SESL 2013; PPE 2014) suggests that, like the Dundee Project, local TFPs are varying the intensity of the intervention according to the needs of the family. Targeted and persistent interventions characterise the way of working, as does a flexible approach. Early indications are that behavioural change is likely to be achieved in some families (increased school attendance, reduced crime and ASB), but that addressing worklessness presents the biggest challenge. And, a bigger challenge is helping families to find work that will move them out of poverty.

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