“Families First”: A study into the Coalition Government’s “Troubled Families Programme” in Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

(Head of the Programme in Leeds: Lesley Wilkinson)

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Note: The views contained in this report do not reflect those held by the University of Leeds or Leeds City Council, and are solely the product of the writer’s research in the field, and her reflexive engagement and critical analysis of the data gathered. All primary data has been anonymized.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................3

What exactly are “troubled families”? An introduction to: families with multiple problems/disadvantages, families experiencing multiple adversities, and families with multiple and complex needs in the UK......................................................................................................................5

Methodology ......................................................................................................................................12

The Troubled Families Programme: national level .............................................................................14

The Troubled Families Programme: local level – Leeds, West Yorkshire (renamed “Families First”) .................................................................................................................................................25

The parents/carers of children/young people with additional needs support meeting ...............28

Conclusion ..........................................................................................................................................35
Introduction

David Cameron launched the “Troubled Families” Programme, with £448 million committed to the project, through his “Troubled families” speech on the 15th of December 2011, with the aim of changing the lives of 120, 000 “troubled families” nation-wide. The speech is to be specifically contextualized within the aftermath of the London riots, and the riots across other cities and boroughs in England in between the 6th and 10th of August 2011, which featured looting and acts of arson. In the speech, David Cameron emphasized the need for “social recovery” in Britain and the fixing of what he termed the “responsibility deficit”. For Cameron, that consequently entailed “[...] building a stronger society, in which more people understand their obligations, and more take control over their own lives and actions.”

Cameron further made a correlation between “troubled families” and recipients of welfare, and emphasized an expectation of such recipients to change their lives. In addition, Cameron highlighted the potential of these families to “cause others so much misery” and equated them with the notion of “social failure” and its associated financial expense.

Moreover, Cameron specified what he meant by “troubled families” prior to informing us that they cost the public £9 billion per 120,000 families the previous year, or £75,000 per each family:

“Officialdom might call them ‘families with multiple disadvantages’. Some in the press might call them ‘neighbours from hell’. Whatever you call them, we’ve known for years that a relatively small number of families are the source of a large proportion of the problems in society. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Crime. A culture of disruption and irresponsibility that cascades through generations.”

In addition, Cameron also emphasized that “troubled families” necessitated state support, but not through welfare benefits that, according to him, pay them more not to work than actual employment (he referred to this approach as “top-down and patronising”, and blamed it for encouraging families to not take control over their own lives). His notion of state support also emphasized improved education standards and tougher law and order measures. Specifically,

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
his notion of state support has to be freed from excessive bureaucracy and disjunctive, disparate and impersonal interventions, facilitated by a family worker that would assess families and their needs on an individual basis.

In addition, Cameron also proposed simple questions that should be asked in terms of whether or not a “troubled family” is achieving the change he, and by proxy, the Coalition Government, required: Are the children going to school? Are individuals from those families in work? Has anti-social behaviour completely stopped? And how many crimes have been prevented?

David Cameron thus heralded the “Troubled Families” Programme (a three-year programme that will be running until May 2015), to be led by Louise Casey as the Director General at the national level, who will be reporting to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Eric Pickles; the programme has been devolved to local councils nation-wide.
What exactly are “troubled families”? An introduction to: families with multiple problems/disadvantages, families experiencing multiple adversities, and families multiple and complex needs in the UK

There is an abundant amount of literature on families with multiple problems, families with multiple disadvantages, families experiencing multiple adversities, and families with multiple and complex needs, which, in accordance with David Cameron’s terminology, are now also known as “troubled families”. However, the Troubled Families Programme in Leeds chose to utilize the word “vulnerable” to characterize families with multiple and complex needs, for reasons that will be explored in more depth in the consequent sections of this report.

In order to thoroughly familiarize and contextualize the reader, this section will aim to elucidate who exactly these families are, or rather, what characteristics render them “troubled” in accordance to Government standards, policies and legislation. The discussion will be specifically situated within the United Kingdom, from the period of New Labour’s time in power to the present Coalition Government (1997 – 2013).

“Supporting Families”, a Green Paper by the New Labour Government published by the Home Office on October 1998, was the first time any British Government had specifically published a consultation paper on the family.6 As Trevor Spratt argues, New Labour was “concerned with identification of high-cost and low-productivity populations”7, and targeted them with a series of investment policies that combined social and economic goals through the notion of rights being directly correlated with personal responsibilities8. The notion of responsibilities strongly emphasized labour-market participation.9

The New Labour government produced a number of documents that dealt with, amongst other issues, families with multiple and complex needs, such as the “Every Child Matters” Green Paper10, the “Policy Review of Children and Young People: A Discussion Paper”11,

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the “Building on Progress: Families” policy paper\textsuperscript{12}, the “Families at Risk Review”\textsuperscript{13} by the former Social Exclusion Task Force, and the Respect Agenda\textsuperscript{14}. All these documents, amongst other issues, sought to deal with social exclusion, economic deprivation, and anti-social (and criminal) behaviour through parent intervention.\textsuperscript{15} The Respect Agenda in particular emphasized anti-social behaviour whilst setting out a strategy to improve the quality and availability of parenting support generally.\textsuperscript{16}

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which introduced Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (or ASBOs), also introduced parenting orders, which were further extended by the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 (with the additional introduction of parenting contracts as an alternative to parenting orders). Parenting orders were to be utilized when a child had received an ASBO or was convicted of a criminal offence, or when a parent had failed to ensure the child was attending school. The parenting orders would be inclusive of a stipulation to attend counselling or guidance programmes, such as parenting classes.\textsuperscript{17}

New Labour thus couched the notions of multiple problems/disadvantages/complex needs within families with socio-economic deprivation and/or criminal and anti-social behaviour. Indeed, the notion of social exclusion as a factor that further isolates parents from the information and assistance that facilitates effective parenting has been argued to be implicit in the approach to New Labour family policies\textsuperscript{18}. However, the notion of social exclusion that has guided New Labour policies has been argued to be ideological (a deviation from “mainstream values and aspirations”) rather than focused on any potential marginalization

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Ibid.
\item[17] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
from material resources. However, the “Think Family: A Literature Review of Whole Family Approaches”, by the former Social Exclusion Task Force, acknowledged and emphasized that poverty and economic disadvantage are central to any understanding of families experiencing multiple and enduring difficulties. Taking an arguably more pragmatic approach, Mary Daly has argued that New Labour’s approach to family policy was an ideological project that was both social and economic in nature. In addition, an implicit “moral judgment” has been argued as having directed the nature and type of support given to parents, especially with regards to disadvantaged parents.

More specifically, the Social Exclusion Task Force in June 2007 underlined the following criteria as being indicative of a family with disadvantages:

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

The Department of Education further provides the following criteria to identify families with multiple and complex needs:

- Persistent offending behaviour
- Persistent anti-social behaviour
- Prejudiced behaviour

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19 Ibid, p. 70.
22 Supra, note 19, p. 70.
• Mental health issues
• Drugs and alcohol problems
• Domestic violence
• Safeguarding issues
• Vulnerability
• Poverty
• Debt
• Unemployment

Moreover, as Mary Daly argues, New Labour tailored its approach to families in accordance to six areas: education, the care and well-being of children, financial support for families with children, services for families, parental employment, work/family reconciliation, and family functioning.\(^{25}\)

The New Labour notion of rights correlating with responsibilities also saw a shift in the manner in which welfare and social services were administered, and the manner in which the individuals, and by proxy, families were positioned to the State and related to it. The neo-liberal paradigm that partially governed New Labour politics (and which continues to an even greater extent with the current Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition government) saw social citizenship become increasingly entwined with market principles. Thus, not only were citizens expected to participate in the labour-market as part of their responsibilities as members of society; citizens were also increasingly made to relate to the State and its services and provisions as consumers (a shift that was initiated by prior Thatcherite policies).\(^{26}\) This is a trend, that continues to this day, and has indeed amplified under the current Coalition government, with the intensified expectation of families to become independent economic actors minimally reliant on the state and its services.

The current Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition government’s definition of families with multiple and complex needs parallels the definition promulgated by the New Labour government, with disadvantages inclusive of, inter alia, worklessness, debt, drug and alcohol

\(^{25}\) Supra, note 21.

dependency, and crime. The current Coalition government also acknowledges that issues such as gender, disability and ethnicity can further exacerbate the disadvantages that individuals experience. Specifically, and according to the Troubled Families programme financial framework, troubled families are households who: are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, have children not in school, have an adult on out-of-work benefits, and “cause high costs to the public purse”.

In addition, the Coalition government’s definition emphasizes that these families are not only troubled, but a source of trouble, both to local services and to their communities. As Pickles has argued:

“120,000 families are a big problem for this country. If you live near one you know very well who they are. And local services like police, health and schools also know who they are, because they spend a disproportionate amount of time and money dealing with them. These families are both troubled and causing trouble. We want to get to the bottom of their problems and resolve them – for their own good, and for the good of their communities.”

Louise Casey’s “Listening to Troubled Families” report is a pivotal document in terms of analysing the current approach to troubled families. The report is based on an analysis of sixteen case studies of families participating in Family Intervention Projects. The foreword begins by explicitly framing families with multiple and complex needs as not only having “entrenched, long-term cycles of suffering problems” but as “causing problems” as well. The foreword also emphasizes that the problems are generally intergenerational, with a common theme of sexual and physical abuse. The issue of individuals involved not co-

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28 Ibid.
operating with agencies and experiencing a “sense of being victims”\textsuperscript{33}, apparently reinforced by an extended network of family and friends, is also discussed.

Indeed, and more specifically, the “What the interviews tells us”\textsuperscript{34} section of the report comprehensively sets out the issues of that the interviews with the families raised (and arguably by proxy, the issues that constitute “troubled families”) as: large numbers of children; shifting family make-up (with, inter alia, extended networks of half siblings and step siblings, biological fathers being absent, and new boyfriends: the report designates these families as “structurally unstable”\textsuperscript{35}); dysfunctional relationships (between the parents themselves, between the parents and their children, between their friends and extended family members, and even between parents and the professionals assigned to them); anti-social family and friends networks; sexual and physical abuse; histories of institutional care; teenage mothers; violence; early signs of poor behaviour; problems with regards to children and school; histories of anti-social behaviour; mental health problems such as depression; and histories of problems with drugs and/or alcohol.

A briefing by Adfam, working in collaboration with DrugScope\textsuperscript{36} has provided two salient features of “troubled families” in accordance to the description propounded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG): “[T]hey face multiple, inter-related social issues likely to lead to pooper outcomes; and they cause problems for others.” This definition more clearly contextualizes families with multiple problems and complex needs as facing social issues likely to lead to poorer outcomes (thus effectively contextualizing personal responsibility within the broader framework of the social and economic factors that individuals, and by proxy, families, operate in), as well as reinforcing the Coalition’s unequivocal position that these families “cause problems for others” (which consequently stigmatizes and homogenizes all families with multiple and complex needs as constituting a nuisance).

The Coalition government’s approach in terms of the provision and delivery of social services to families with multiple and complex needs also parallels, albeit to an arguably greater extent, New Labour’s neo-liberal approach. Reducing the “high costs to the public

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, pp. 46 – 64.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p. 48.
purse”\textsuperscript{37} is a priority for the Coalition, in which a shifting away from the state maintaining these families financially, with all the associated costs that their “problems” and needs generate, to these families financially maintaining themselves, is implied. This approach is reinforced in the “\textit{Working with Troubled Families: A guide to the evidence and good practice}”\textsuperscript{38}, which takes on an agentic approach that focuses entirely on the families and treats their problems as endogenous and self-generated, rather than examining the structural factors, and larger socio-economic context in which those families operate. This has the effect of individualizing problems that may be more accurately viewed, either partially or entirely, through the prism of poverty and material deprivation, rather than exclusively laying the blame on the families themselves and labelling them as “dysfunctional”\textsuperscript{39}.

\textsuperscript{37} Supra, note 29, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 9.
Methodology

The placement undertaken which allowed for the research which culminated in this report entailed joining the head of the Troubled Families Programme, Lesley Wilkinson, and seeking to interview professionals, and most pertinently, vulnerable families and ask them the specific questions promulgated, with an emphasis on what exactly it would mean for them to “turn their lives around”. (The specific notion of “turning around” the lives of families nation-wide can be found in the introduction of Louise Casey’s “Listening to Troubled Families” report). This specific project was exclusively directed towards enquiring of vulnerable families what it would mean for them to “turn their lives around”, and how services and provisions could be better deliver to them, and what needed to change (if anything) in order for families to achieve that goal. Again, this follows the stipulations in the introduction of Louise Casey’s “Listening to Troubled Families” report, in which it is provided that:

“[…] before the programme of delivery proceeded any further, it was thought important to listen directly to troubled families in order to get a true and recent understanding of the problems they faced, their histories and what the real challenges of ‘turning around’ thousands of other such families nationwide would entail.”

Professionals were also included in terms of enquiring of them how services and provisions could improve and how they could be better delivered to vulnerable families.

Furthermore, this particular project and research undertaking did not entail seeking to assist the families, but rather, to gather empirical data that could be utilized in the future to potentially contribute towards understanding, firstly, what it would be mean for families to “turn their lives around”; and secondly, how to better deliver services and provisions in order to fulfil those objectives. The notion of a family “turning their life around” was left subjective and open wholly to interpretation to the families in question. However, the Troubled Families programme financial framework does provide “Technical details on measurements of results” that may guide and provide a prism through which to interpret what exactly “turning around” lives constitutes in accordance to the objectives and principles of this current Coalition government. Succinctly, these technical details on measurement of results

40 Supra, note 31, p. 4.
41 Ibid.
42 Supra, note 29, pp. 19 – 23.
refer to a reduction in anti-social behaviour, crime, consistent attendance in school, progress towards work, and a move into continuous employment, with results being measured generally within the last six months.

There was an immediate, recurring problem encountered with professionals who work with families with multiple and complex needs, with professionals deeming the interview questions that were specifically designed for the project as alienating. This was so even though the term “troubled” had been explicitly removed from any documentation or correspondence with regards to the project, and the Troubled Families Programme in Leeds had renamed itself “Families First Leeds”, with an emphasis on “vulnerable”, rather than “troubled” families. In addition, the interview questions (in a semi-structured format), both for families and professionals, had gone through a number of redrafting processes and had received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds.

The recruiting process for participants therefore encountered problems from the outset, with a zero-response rate to invitations to participate in the research. A potential cause for the lack of response rate was that the initial invitations were sent out over the summer holidays (July 2012), thus potentially rendering parents less available to respond. However, the lack of response persisted for the following months, until the termination of this research placement (January 2013).

One parent/carer-support meeting was attended, specifically to support carers/parents with children/young people with additional needs, from which the only primary empirical data was gathered for this. Despite the attendance being limited to solely one meeting, a significant amount of useful data was gathered about how services and provisions could be better delivered at a local level for the Troubled Families programme generally. To reiterate, all the names of the participants who agreed to be recorded at the parent/carer support meeting have been anonymized, and all the details of the parent/carer support meeting have been omitted in order to further preserve the anonymity of the participants involved.
The Troubled Families Programme: national level

The Troubled Families Programme has received a lot of criticism from academic commentators from the outset. To begin with, Ruth Levitas has critiqued the technical details on measurements of results43, firstly by implicitly critiquing that the definition of “persistent absence” (15% absence) is inclusive of severely disabled and sick children who miss school due to ill-health. She further critiques the definition of results as being conditional upon attachment to a work programme or continuous employment in the face of rising unemployment rates, which consequently and misguidedness pathologizes individuals who are unemployed not through choice, but because of economic circumstances beyond their control. Levitas further argues that the 120,000 families in question do indeed have troubles, but that these troubles are more accurately “physical and mental ill-health, poor housing, income poverty, and material deprivation.”44

Ruth Levitas has intensely criticized the approach of the Coalition government, and David Cameron specifically, towards “troubled families”. Understanding this critique is fundamental as it may shed light upon a shift in focus that may be necessary when considering how these families can receive better support and services that actually assists them in “turning their lives around”. The question at stake not be so much the manner in which those services are delivered, but rather, the ideological underpinnings that support them, and largely misguidedness focus on the wrong issues (such as that it is the parents and children’s behaviour that primarily needs to change, rather than the fact that more pressingly, the families in question may be afflicted by “ill-health, poverty and poor housing”45).

In particular, through her commentary “Still not listening”46, Ruth Levitas has argued that Louise Casey’s approach is one in which the poor, and solely by nature of their economic deprivation, are stigmatized as “dysfunctional”, on both an individual level and as families. She bases this argument on an analysis of Casey’s “Listening to Troubled Families”47 report. Moreover, Levitas argues that Casey’s analysis of sixteen family case studies is “pseudo-

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43 Supra, note 29.
45 Supra, note 33, p. 10.
47 Supra, note 31.
research” and is too small in number to be representative of the “multiply deprived families who make up the so-called 120,000 troubled families”48 and their heterogeneous circumstances (although Levitas does not deny that the families presented by Casey do exist). As Levitas argues:

“There are sixteen of them. They are at best (or worst) a tiny minority of those suffering severe and multiple deprivation, a tiny minority of those children living in poverty and those families struggling with the consequences of recurrent poverty and increasing austerity.”49

However, the introduction of the “Listening to Troubled Families” report does make it explicit that, although some conclusions may be draw from the families’ accounts in question with regards to how services may work best with families holistically, it does not seek to make “wholesale conclusions about services”. Moreover, it states that:

“the case studies do not pretend to be an exact science [...] It must also be noted that this is not formal research and that these interviews and the information they gave us is not representative of the 120,000 families that are deemed as ‘troubled’; every family will have their own set of problems and complex histories, some may be less serious as those outlined in this report, and perhaps some more so.”50

Nonetheless, the report, in concurrence with Levitas’s critique, does deem these sixteen families to be a good starting point to inform thinking and policy development; sixteen families may indeed be arguably too small a number to function as a starting point from which to base any consequent tactics, strategies and policy developments with regards to families experiencing multiple, intergenerational deprivations. As Levitas argues:

“It presents sixteen case studies of families participating in Family Intervention Projects, claiming that this is ‘a good starting place to inform our thinking and policy development’. Well, no it isn’t. This is policy-making by anecdote, more akin to tabloid journalism than serious research. Casey’s group is not representative of those targeted by the TFP, and it is certainly not representative of the multiply deprived families who make up the

48 Supra, note 40.
49 Ibid.
50 Supra, note 40.
so-called 120,000 troubled families. This pseudo-research serves only to present the poor as dysfunctional, both as individuals and as families.”

Levitas further critiques Casey presenting the problem as, inter alia, one of women having a number of children, often at a young age, and often by different fathers (eight of the sixteen families in the case studies had four or more children). As Levitas puts it, Casey’s report “presents the problem as one of large families by multiple partners forming a burgeoning dysfunctional underclass resistant to reform.” By drawing a comparison to “Reaching Out: Think Family” report, Levitas argues that Casey’s sample is too small to be generalizable to the population as a whole, and discredits the notion that one of the issues of families with multiple deprivations is that they are having too many children. By again drawing an example from the “Reaching Out: Think Family Report”, Levitas also criticizes the notion of children in disadvantaged families being associated with crime, anti-social behaviour and exclusion from school, by arguing that “90 per cent of the children in these very deprived families had had no contact with the police; and nearly 90 per cent had not been excluded from school.”

The Poverty and Social Exclusion in the United Kingdom (PSE) research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, further emphasizes that the “Troubled Families” programme is flawed in its assumption that troubled families are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, with the problem more accurately being multiple deprivations; these families have further been subjected to attack rather than an accurate acknowledgement of their multiple disadvantages. The discursive strategy employed in labelling these families is also critiqued, with Levitas arguing that the notion of troubled families is taken to imply not just families with troubles, but families that cause troubles. As Levitas argues in “There may be ‘trouble’ ahead: what we know about those 120,000 ‘troubled’ families”:

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Supra, note 40.

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“As we have seen, ‘troubled families’ discursively collapses ‘families with troubles’ and ‘troublesome families’, while simultaneously implying that they are dysfunctional as families. This discursive strategy is successful in feeding vindictive attitudes to the poor.”

Levitas again reiterates that the Coalition government misrepresents research previously conducted on families experiencing multiple disadvantages, and with the term “troubled families” “deliberately conflates families experiencing multiple disadvantages and families that cause trouble”58. Again, the problems with regards to the terminology were picked up by Children’s Services in Leeds, with a change to the term “vulnerable” and the project as a whole being renamed “Families First”. Nonetheless, a change in terminology at a local level may not have been sufficient, at the very least with regards to the attitudes of professionals and the recruitment of potential families as research participants for this report. It could be argued that a change in terminology at the local level does not erase the wording of the programme on a national level, or the perception of it by the families in question and the professionals working with them. As the briefing by Adfam, written in collaboration with DrugScope, has argued:

“Efforts must be made not to reinforce the public opinion, often fuelled by the media, that there exist a number of badly behaved ‘problem families’ which constitute an irreversible drain on society and are categorically different from the rest of us.”

Indeed, Casey’s “Listening to Troubled Families”60 report does seem to apportion a large amount of the blame and responsibility on the families themselves, without paying equal attention to, and highlighting in detail, the structural inequalities, and specifically economic disadvantages, that may exacerbate, if not contribute to causing the problems elucidated in the report. Indeed, nowhere in the report are structural inequalities, and by proxy, economic disadvantages, discussed. This is a departure from the Cabinet and Social Exclusion Task Force’s approach, particularly as highlighted in the “Think Family: literature review of whole family approaches” report, which explicitly acknowledged that:

57 Supra, note 37, p. 5.
59 Supra, note 36, p. 7.
60 Supra, note 31.
“It has been assumed that the experiences of poverty and economic disadvantage run throughout this review, and are core to any consideration of the needs of families with multiple and enduring difficulties.”

Thus, with Casey’s report, families’ problems are presented as endogenous and self-generated, and entirely relegated to their own personal familial context and histories. Personal agency is thus privileged over structural factors that are in reality beyond an individual’s control and firmly place these families at a disadvantage, and unrealistic expectations are further made that these families overcome their problems and “turn their lives around” within the context of structural factors that are largely unfavourable towards them. As Michael Orton has argued, understanding “agency within structure”, i.e. how individual agency is exercised within a context of structural inequality, is imperative, and this is something that Louise Casey’s report, and the Coalition government generally, have largely failed to do.

Moreover, issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class, the further disadvantages that they may cause, and the way in which such factors may intersect to further exacerbate problems and exclusion, are completely overlooked. As Casey argues, particularly in the context of dysfunctional relationships with professional agencies, whilst simultaneously ignoring the larger social, political, cultural, and economic context in which these families exist:

“Many families complained about professionals or agencies involved with them, and in particular, social services [...]. Undoubtedly, some families have reason to feel let down. But there were often unwarranted feelings that their problems were not of their making, and that they had no control over the problem or its solution [...]. Several families talked of needing a bigger house from the council as a cause of problems for them, or of not getting enough free childcare, or they blame teachers and schools for failing their children – when it was clear that their troubles were arising from their home life.”

This agentic approach, in which families are regarded as largely the source of their own problems, whilst generally disregarding, if not entirely ignoring, social stratification and hierarchical power relations within society generally, echoes David Cameron’s speech against “moral neutrality”, in which he argued that:

61 Supra, note 20: p. 2.
63 Ibid, p. 51.
‘We talk about people being ‘at risk of obesity’ instead of talking about people who
eat too much and take too little exercise. We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or
social exclusion: it's as if these things - obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction - are purely
external events like a plague or bad weather. Of course, circumstances - where you are born,
your neighbourhood, your school, and the choices your parents make - have a huge impact.
But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make.’”64

The structural inequalities that these families may be facing must be further contextualized
within the backdrop of the economic crisis of 2007-08, the current double-dip recession in the
UK, and the welfare reforms implemented by the Coalition government. On taking office, the
Coalition government targeted the social security budget, with cuts to welfare spending
totalling £18 billion per year by 2014 – 1565 (with the March 2012 Budget highlighting the
possibility of a further £10 billion of welfare cuts in the future)66. Budgets that are highly
relevant to families with multiple and complex needs that have been cut include, but are not
limited to:

- Child Trust Fund, in which parents of new-borns received a minimum £250 voucher
to invest in their children, and which children have access to when they reach 18 years
of age. The additional £250 that children received when they reached seven years of
age was also cut.67
- Health in Pregnancy Grant, a £190 grant introduced in 2009 for pregnant women on
accessing health and dietary guidance.68
- The Sure Start Maternity Grant has been limited to the first child only. The grant gave
low-income families £500 to help with maternity expenses.69
- Child Benefit rates have been frozen up until 2014.70

UK-moral-neutrality-full-text.html [13 February 2013].
[13 February 2013].
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/savings/7759042/Spending-cuts-Child-Trust-Funds-
axed.html [13 February 2013].
68 Supra, note 60, p.1.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
• The baby element from the Child Tax Credit has been removed (applicable when for those with a baby under 12 months).

• Childcare costs covered by working tax credit have been cut from 80% to 70%.

• The Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) has been introduced for those on previous incapacity benefits. The ESA is meant to reduce the number of people who qualify for benefits.

• Homeowners who claim benefits due to unemployment or illness are entitled to help with the interest on mortgages, but the amount has been cut from 6.08% to 3.63%, thus putting a greater number of individuals at risk of repossession.

• Housing reforms have seen a reduction in spending on social housing by half.

Effectively, and as Taylor-Goody and Stoker have pointed out, the Coalition government has embarked on a considerable programme of public spending cuts from 2010 until 2015. The large-scale project of retrenchment to deal with the public sector deficit has also seen a commitment by the Coalition government to increased welfare conditionality and welfare residualization generally. The reforms have also been inclusive of a significant shifting of responsibility away from the public sector onto the private sector, the community and citizens.

A 2012 study commissioned by Action for Children, the Children’s Society and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to children by Howard Reed from Landman Economics has further found that the changes to tax and benefits systems will, on average, have a negative impact on “vulnerable” families (the study utilizes the same definition of vulnerability as the one utilized by the Social Exclusion Task Force in 2007, although it takes a wider view and encompasses families that demonstrated fewer than five of the criteria listed, as well as more). In accordance to changes to the tax and benefits system, the study argues that vulnerable families stand to lose approximately £3000 a year, with a decrease in

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Supra, note 59.
79 Supra, note 23.
total living standards of 7%\textsuperscript{80}. As Reed argues, the changes to the tax and benefits system enacted over the course of this Parliament will result in:

“[…] adverse effects on vulnerable families [which] are a result of a combination of the VAT increase, the cuts to Child Benefit, the replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payment, the reforms to Employment and Support Allowance, reductions in the generosity of tax credits and the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit reductions, and finally the introduction of the Universal Credit in 2013. The introduction of Universal Credit offsets a small amount of the other tax and benefit changes, but the increases in net income for vulnerable groups arising from Universal Credits are nowhere near large enough to offset the other changes completely.”\textsuperscript{81}

Writing with regards to the abolition of Council Tax Benefits (CBT) on a national level and its devolution to a local level as of the 1\textsuperscript{st} of April 2013, Matthew Pennycook and Alex Hurrell\textsuperscript{82} further highlight that the abolition of CBT on a national scale will negatively impact upon low-income households. This is without mentioning the fact that the devolution will be accompanied by a 10% reduction in funding from central government. Many unemployed individuals who presently receive CBT will have to pay council tax amounts ranging from £96 to £255 a year. Of the families assessed, the report further provides that the most detrimentally affected by the Council Tax Benefit changes will be single parents who work part-time and depend on childcare\textsuperscript{83}. As the report provides:

“A typical single parent with children in childcare and working part-time on the National Minimum Wage (NMW) will face increases in their annual Council Tax bill ranging from £96 (an increase of 55 per cent on their current payment) to £577 (an increase of 333 per cent on their current payment) depending on the severity of the local scheme introduced.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80} Supra, note 72, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, p. 71. The Universal Credit is the benefit system that will be replacing all current means-tested welfare benefits and in-work tax credits for working-age adults into one integrated scheme, and will be phased in from October 2013.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, p. 3.
Consequently, the financial pressure that such changes are going to cause will undoubtedly affect the cohort of vulnerable families, thus potentially causing additional stress and increasing the magnitude and number of vulnerabilities experienced by those families.

The manner in which Universal Credit (which, to briefly reiterate, is the benefit system that will be replacing all current means-tested welfare benefits and in-work tax credits, for working-age adults, into one integrated scheme, and which will be phased in from October 2013) will be paid is also highly problematic, particularly in the context of vulnerable families. Universal Credit will customarily be paid on a monthly basis at the household level (unless eligibility for alternative payment arrangements has been established by the Department of Work and Pensions[^85]), and couples may choose whether the money is paid into a single account or a joint account. This is highly precarious in families in which, inter alia, domestic violence, alcohol and/or drug abuse or gambling problems may be present[^86].

The Coalition government’s plan for the manner in which Universal Credit will be administered thus has the potential to further exacerbate the problems that vulnerable families are already experiencing by directing and monopolizing the finances at a household level, rather than facilitating and promoting financial independence for each working-age adult concerned. A discussion document by Oxfam (Great Britain[^87]) has critiqued the use of the household as the assessment unit due to its potential to reinforce women’s dependent status, and by proxy, gender inequality. As the report argues:

> “Economic autonomy is a particular issue for women from vulnerable and excluded groups such as traveller women, migrant women and those whose first language is not English. A lack of autonomy is also associated with higher levels of vulnerability to violence, particularly the patterns of coercive control that characterise domestic violence.”[^88]

Further, the Department of Work and Pensions’ approach to alternative payment arrangements seems entirely oblivious to the fact that individuals experiencing domestic violence may fear reprisals if a claim for a separate payment is made (or is triggered[^89]). The

[^85]: Ibid.
[^88]: Ibid, p. 5.
[^89]: Supra, note 81.
single payment system thus has the potential to further exacerbate domestic violence and facilitate coercive control exercised through financial means.

In addition, the discussion document by Oxfam has explicitly criticized the Coalition government’s single payment system at the household level by arguing that it has the potential to render women in the household poorer generally. Moreover, the discussion document further criticized the single benefit payment system and the associated loss of the Child Tax Credit, and its potential detrimental impact upon children (even though Child Benefit is non-means tested, and therefore excluded from the single payment system). This is due to the fact that the claimant in a couple is more likely to be the man; however, women are more likely to spend money on children’s needs, and under the new system, could end up with less money to spend on them. This has the potential to further exacerbate the problems of vulnerable families, and particularly, vulnerable children who may already be experiencing material deprivation.

Moreover, the discussion document by Oxfam criticizes the tightening of the conditionality requirements for benefit and tax credit claims as potentially and particularly pressuring those with caring responsibilities; lone mothers with several children are cited as those who “are most likely to suffer from both time and income poverty.” Any gains made in time or income threatens the other, thus

“[…]making it more difficult if not impossible for them to comply with increased conditionality to work longer hours at the same time as striving to take care of their parenting duties; given their low earnings, there are unlikely to be enough hours in the day for them to do both.”

Further research has also found that the transition to the monthly payments of benefits (as opposed to weekly or fortnightly) is a cause of concern and anxiety for some low-income households. Some service users have voiced a concern that juggling competing financial obligations with a limited income could mean that they would run out of money before the end of each month. In an attempt to counteract this, the Department of Work and Pensions

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Supra, note 79.
has committed itself to providing personal budgeting support. However, the transition to monthly payments may nonetheless cause anxieties for some families who have to adapt, with some adapting faster than others. Such apprehensions about the meeting of financial obligations, whilst simultaneously learning how to budget effectively, could only further amplify the pressure and stress that vulnerable families, who are often within the low-income household cohort, already experience. Learning how to budget effectively over a monthly period is further compounded by the fact that simply budgeting on a low-income is challenging enough as it is, regardless of the time-frame in question.

As Family Action has succinctly argued, welfare reforms should support the agenda on “troubled families”; instead, the reforms, “chiefly the housing and welfare caps” are actually making the implementing of the programme much harder. Further, a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has predicted that the Coalition government’s tax and benefit cuts will increase the number of people in relative poverty after 2013. More specifically, a separate report by the IFS for the Family & Parenting Institute has forecasted that due to the austerity measures, the median (middle) income among households with children is set to fall in real terms by 4.2% between 2010–11 and 2015–16; this is the equivalent to an annual reduction in income of £1,250 for a couple with two children. Even more disconcertingly, 500,000 more children will fall into absolute poverty in the period between 2010-11 and 2015-16, and 300,000 of these children will come from households where the youngest child is under five. As the report succinctly states:

“As a result of the changes being introduced between January 2011 and April 2014 families are set to lose more than pensioner households and working-age households without

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96 Supra, note 79.
100 The definition of “absolute poverty” is derived from the Child Poverty Act (2010) in which poverty is “absolute” if the household’s equivalised income is below 60% of the 2010 – 11 national median income (in real terms). The Child Poverty Act refers only to incomes measured before housing costs have been deducted.
101 Supra, note 99.
children. Looking at the picture before the introduction of Universal Credit we see families with children lose just over 6% of their income, compared to just under 4% for all households and 3% for working age households without children. Pensioners lose less than 2% of their income. It is particularly notable that it is generally those families with the lowest incomes who are losing the most from the reforms. For example, non-working lone parents lose more than 12% of their income on average – equivalent to £2,000 per year. Such a steep drop for lone parents is of very real concern; in order to find work they will have to confront the dual challenges of finding a flexible job in a highly uncertain labour market and meeting the costs of childcare.”

102 Ibid, p. 3.
The “Troubled Families” Programme: local level – Leeds, West Yorkshire (renamed “Families First”)

The Leeds Troubled Families Programme was established as part of the Children’s Trust agenda to meet the payment-by-results requirements of the national programme. The Leeds Troubled Families Programme, or “Families First”, was designed to deliver improvements in family outcomes and to:

- Reduce the number of “looked after children” (i.e. children who are, in some form, being looked after by local authorities).
- Reduce 16 and 17 year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Reduce persistent absenteeism.
- Reduce youth crime.
- Reduce adult and youth anti-social behaviour.
- Reduce worklessness.

Given that “Families First” is based in Children’s Services (although the programme is cross-cutting across Leeds City Council and with key partners in Leeds), the programme also has a focus, or “obsessions”, on three specific indicators that are linked to the poorest outcomes (these three “obsessions” can likewise be found in the “Children and Young People’s Plan 2011-2015”). Lesley Wilkinson has further argued that these “obsessions” “represent powerful entry points which can result in positive ‘knock-on’ effects in other areas.” These obsessions are:

- Reducing the need for children to become looked after.
- Improving school attendance.
- Reducing the number of young people NEET.

More specifically, the overall desired outcomes of the programme at the local level are:

- Children being sustained and supported in education.

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104 Ibid.
105 Ibid, p.5.
107 Ibid.
• The reduction of anti-social behaviour and crime (inclusive of both parents and children).
• Reducing the risk of eviction and supporting people to sustain their tenancies.
• Supporting parents back into employment.
• Reducing the number of families who live in poverty.
• Addressing alcohol, drug and mental health issues.
• The reduction of levels of repeat victimization (for example, domestic violence).
• The reduction of the number of children on child protection plans.
• The reduction in the number of children becoming looked after.
• The reduction of young people NEET\textsuperscript{108}.

Children’s Services in Leeds is acutely aware that the language that has been utilized on a national level to characterize families with multiple problems/disadvantages, or families with complex needs, is alienating, and has consequently renamed the Troubled Families Programme “Families First” at the local level. This awareness was present from the outset of the commencement of this research placement\textsuperscript{109}, and was made more acute as feedback from professionals about the semi-structured interview questions designed for this project, provided that even a “dilution” of specifically the term “troubled” to “vulnerable” was insufficient to mitigate any potential alienation that could be experienced by the families in question.

Further, Children’s Services is labouring to ensure that they listen attentively to service users, with an aim to further identify opportunities in which service users have a say in the manner in which services and provisions with regards to “Families First” are implemented and delivered. In addition, the approach that “Families First” at Children’s Services is pursuing in their work with families with multiple disadvantages and complex needs is fundamentally restorative\textsuperscript{110}. As Lesley Wilkinson argues, this approach is “based on the fundamental premise that people are happier, more co-operative and more likely to make positive changes when practitioners do things \emph{with} them, rather than \emph{to} or \emph{for} them.”\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} Supra, note 91.
\textsuperscript{109} See also Wilkinson, ibid, in which she highlights a potential risk of the programme as being the “Negative perceptions regarding the terminology of the programme [that] may impact on the engagement of families.”: p.12.
\textsuperscript{110} Supra, note 91.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, p. 5 (emphases in the original).
This is combined with work to support whole family approaches with key partners, including adult services, health, police, and housing, again whilst aligning the work within a restorative practice framework\textsuperscript{112}. In addition, it is also aimed that the programme at the local level will be integrated into the “core business”\textsuperscript{113} of Children’s Services generally, and not serve as a mere, transient measure.

\textsuperscript{112} Supra, note 91.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, p.8
The parents/carers of children/young people with additional needs support meeting

The parent/carer support group meeting, (specifically, a group to support carers/parents with children/young people with additional needs) that was attended was beneficial and informative, firstly in terms of gathering information with regards to how parents/carers perceived the Troubled Families Programme, and more specifically, the terminology utilized by the programme; and secondly, with regards to how parents/carers perceive professionals working in local authorities. The parents/carers were incredibly open and unequivocally direct in their opinions, first-hand experiences and general views.

After I had asked for the participants to provide me with as much information as they could, and to be as honest as possible, as the meeting would most likely be my only opportunity to speak to them due to the deadline imposed on my placement, an immediate confession of a sense of jadedness and scepticism towards professionals was voiced by one participant. As the participant put it, after laughter followed my comments:

“We’re only laughin’ because generally professionals don’t want honesty, and generally don’t want opinions. They just want you to say how good things are.”

The participants were also asked about the notion of “turning lives around” that is utilized by the Government, and whether it meant anything to them. There was a general consensus that the term was irrelevant to the families in question, and that the term “troubled families” was something imposed on them by others. The notion of pride, and the families in question being proud of themselves and their children, was made clear. As a participant put it:

“No. I think we’re all quite proud of our lives. They might not be perfect, but we’re proud of what we achieve.”

When questioned about the support they had received through their life-time, a participant immediately interjected:

“Can we use the “K” word? Key-worker? I had a key-worker. That worked for us. From a time of crisis to a smooth transition into life.”

However, there was an immediate problem identified with some participants that although key-workers were vital, their departure after relationships with a particular key-worker was
established was difficult, as the departure seemed to create a sense of disruption and discontinuity in the families’ lives. As a participant provided with regards to key-workers departing after children had become used to a certain key-worker:

“[…] then they leave. Then they get someone else, maternity leave, etc. Or you get someone you don’t like […] and sometimes, when things are improvin’, they’ll go. ‘We’ve sorted you, now we don’t need to come back.’ And then it’s like, two weeks later, it’s all downhill again.”

Another participant suggested that rather than an exit strategy to prevent any potential resurfacing of issues that had been resolved with a key-worker’s help, monthly reviews could be instituted in order to ensure the families were doing well; further, if a family did once again enter into a “crisis”, they would immediately be “back in the system”; there was also an emphasis that participants would prefer re-entering the system with someone who “already knows the child”. The [Leeds] Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) “passport system”, in which a family could “fast-track” back into the system without once again going through the six-week assessment period, and which is valid for three-years, was mentioned. Indeed, there was a general consensus voicing support for this kind of arrangement (the passport system), and a desire that such a system be built into any new services provided by the council.

There was also a strong emphasis expressed by the families that they did not feel listened to and that this could be changed, specifically within this context, through an “early start” and comprehensively educating professionals with regards to children/young people with additional needs. As one participant put it with regards to teachers specifically (with the argument easily being transposed to all professionals dealing with children/young people with additional needs):

“Some teachers […] are very old-school. When they trained to be teachers, they wouldn’t have come across our kids. And you have professionals going in advising them, autism outreach teachers going in [and the situation is] ‘I’m not having anyone tellin’ me what to with my classroom [murmur in agreement from another participant]. But then you’ve got the young, really enthusiastic, young teachers coming through now, that are being taught about inclusion. But then, they get one lesson a seminar. A two-hour lecture on autism. They’re all gonna come across autism in their classes. They’re all gonna come across dyslexia. Plus there’s all this ‘fast-track teaching’. How the hell can someone that’s ‘fast-
tracked’ for a year to become a qualified teacher [...] how can they ever fully understand our kids, unless it’s really a core part...you don’t just give them a two-hour lecture. You give them a whole module, and they have to do an assignment on it.”

Further, the participants emphasized the importance of being listened to, and that a great deal of frustration was caused by participants feeling like they were not listened to. Another problem that was highlighted was the amount of bureaucracy involved in dealing with local authorities, and the associated “really long waiting-lists, or they keep changing the criteria for how to get a service.” Access to accurate, up-to-date information was also highlighted as a problem, with participants stating that they relied on other parents and “word of mouth” in order to get information about services from the local authority for their children/family. With regards to how access to information could be improved, one participant mentioned the Family Hope Directory:

“I loved the Family Hope Directory in the old days, that worked for me. It was in a book, it was alphabetical, I could understand it. I appreciate it goes out of date, but you’ve still got something to work on, and you could trace what you needed. Or, you have the central council number on the front that you can ring, and moan, when it’s out of date [...] They’ve stopped making it ’cause it cost money. You’ve now got the Family Hope website which is indecipherable.”

The new Family Hope was critiqued as being unhelpful. Another participant added:

“It’s very complicated. You have to kind of click on about twenty-four different things before you get to the one thing that you want. [And] Not everybody has computer. Not everybody can access computers[...]And a lot of people do it on their phone, and you can’t open that many pages on your phone. Most people do it on their phone[...]and don’t all have home computers as well.”

Again, more support was emphasized and consistently reiterated with regards to informing families about the services available to them, and helping them to access those services. A further critique was the lack of effective communication, and the lack of information sharing, between the different professionals involved with a family, with a participant stating that professionals “hide behind Data Protection”. (However, data protection is a real and justified concern, with the government already having been criticized with regards to information
sharing without informed consent under the Welfare Reform Act 2012, for the purposes of
the Troubled Families Programme).  

One participant stated that the solution to this problem “is a CAF, and we are trying to be a
CAF city” (Common Assessment Framework), and greater information sharing between
professionals in order to fully implement CAF. The Common Assessment Framework,
specifically with regards to children and young people, is a four-step process “whereby
practitioners can identify a child or young person’s needs early, assess those needs
holistically, deliver coordinated services and review progress”\(^\text{115}\). Further, the CAF involves
“integrated working”\(^\text{116}\), with key elements including, inter alia: early intervention, inclusive
of “identifying a small need before it becomes a crisis”; the information on the child or young
person in question being held in one place, with the consent of the child or the parent; and the
sharing of information with the relevant inter-agency practitioners involved with the
child/young person.

As the participant provided:

“If the system was forced over to the CAF approach at first-point of contact for all
families that need or ask for whatever, the CAF will be done, the team around the
child…you’re all moving in the right direction.”

This reinforces and reiterates the views expressed in the Adfam briefing with regards to the
Troubled Families programme and its potential for supporting families affected by substance
abuse specifically (as well as those with other needs). As the briefing provides:

“The inter-agency work on troubled families could also provide a good opportunity to
break down some of the systemic barriers that have typically arisen when services support
families affected by substance use and with other needs. It should have a positive effect
beyond the three-year span of the project by bringing together family support, drug and


alcohol treatment, housing, domestic violence services and others to work together, open channels of communication and improve joint working.”

A report by Family Action on the Troubled Families Programme, particularly in the context of children’s truancy and exclusion, analogously reinforces this argument. As the report argues:

“An open culture, predisposed to joint working, will be needed from health and schools in order to deliver on the Troubled Families programme in partnership with local authorities. The research shows that where these agencies do not co-operate with each other and family support providers, success in tackling school truancy and exclusions is unlikely. Provisions for key workers and common assessments will help.”

Another significant comment that was made as to how services could be improved related to the current economic situation, and the cuts that all local authorities have experienced. The comment was particularly pertinent as it firmly contextualized within, and acknowledged the link between, the issues that families experienced and the broader socio-economic conditions in which they are situated:

“Leeds is really bad...I mean I raised this at school as well...they wait until there’s a problem before they ever do anything. They say they do, and they look at a holistic approach, but they don’t. There’s not even any preventative stuff. Not really to do with disability, like teenage pregnancy. The Youth Services is gonna be cut by so many millions. So the targeted work they’re doing around sexual education and all that [that] prevents teenage pregnancy...is gonna stop. And then they wonder what’s going wrong when they’ve got loads of teenage girls becoming pregnant.”

The participant added, with another participant concurring with regards to supporting “early intervention and early support”:

“It’s the same with health and everything. They wait until people are in crisis...like, going back to a kid’s mental health. They wait until the kid is actually threatening suicide before they can actually get some help involved. Prevention. If preventative work had been

117 Supra, note 36: p. 7.


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done, which actually costs a lot less, than...high-cost residential or really highly paid professionals. They seem to... ‘save the pennies to spend the pound’.”

Again, this is all feedback that is easily transposed to the Families First programme as a whole, and which the Families First programme would benefit from.
Conclusion

Families with multiple and complex needs are facing challenging economic circumstances, which include the double-dip recession and the fiscal tightening measures implemented by the Coalition government. These families must be contextualized socially and economically and their problems, and the potential for poorer outcomes that they face, must be acknowledged as arising out of poverty and social exclusion, as Ruth Levitas has argued, as much, if not more, than through the individualizing of their problems that the Coalition government levels against them. The Coalition government’s approach to reducing the “high costs to the public purse”\(^\text{119}\), in which a shifting away from the state maintaining these families financially, with all the associated costs that their “problems” and needs generate, to these families financially maintaining themselves, needs to equally acknowledge the broader socio-economic economic conditions in which these families operate, and that their potential for “turning their lives around” is constrained by those socio-economic factors. This has to be considered in conjunction with the wide-spread cuts in social services that have been, inter alia, part and parcel of the Coalition government’s austerity programme initiated in 2010.

\(^{119}\) Supra, note 29: p. 3.