
Breakthrough Britain

Briefing Paper 1

FAMILY BREAKDOWN

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This is the Executive Summary of the Family Breakdown volume of the Social Justice Policy Group's *Breakthrough Britain* report. For further information, or to download the full report please visit www.poverty.debate.com

Introduction and State of the Nation

The family is where the vast majority of us learn the fundamental skills for life; physically, emotionally and socially it is the context from which the rest of life flows. However family stability in Britain has been in continuous decline for four decades, and adults and children today are increasingly faced with the challenges of families which are dysfunctional (often because of mental health issues), fractured (through separation or divorce), or fatherless (15% of babies are born into homes with no resident dad). This is especially the case in the least advantaged sections of society but these trends also profoundly affect people across the socioeconomic spectrum. Mental health is the 'Cinderella service' and the policy-making community has been reluctant to 'grasp the nettle' of family breakdown by sending clear signals about the benefits of marriage and committed relationships, and the merits of supporting and encouraging them.



Despite these demographic changes there has been a lack of serious debate concerning their causes, effects and likely remedies. To open that debate, *Fractured Families* looked closely at consequences and causes of these trends:

Consequences

- Since the early 1970s there has been a decline in marriage, and a marked rise in the numbers of lone parent families.
- The ongoing rise in family breakdown affecting young children has been driven by the dissolution of cohabiting partnerships. The majority of these are less stable than marriage (European data shows that by a child's fifth birthday less than 1 in 12 (8%) married parents have split up compared to almost 1 in 2 (43%) cohabiting parents).
- The intergenerational transmission of family breakdown and its associated disadvantages is seen in the way children who have been neglected or un-nurtured are highly likely to go on to create dysfunctional families subject to further breakdown. Similarly there is an overrepresentation in teen pregnancy statistics of girls from fatherless and broken homes.

- Crime is strongly correlated with family breakdown - 70% of young offenders are from lone parent families and one third of prisoners were in local authority care (yet only 0.6% of the nation's children are in care at any one time).
- Costs of family breakdown to the exchequer are estimated to be well over £20bn per annum.

Causes and current/previous governments' policy approaches

- Family structure and family process matter - making a commitment can make a significant difference to behaviours and attitudes but our tax system makes no recognition of marriage and the importance of interdependence between family members. The couple penalty in tax credits disincentivises low-income couples from living together and especially from making a co-residential arrangement unambiguous by marrying, thus implicating the welfare state in the rise of family breakdown.
- Poverty places enormous strain on relationships, as does poor housing and the lack of meaningful employment. (Research indicates the relationship between levels of lone parenthood in an area and poor job opportunities for men.) Supporting adult relationships must be a key concern of family policy rather than of peripheral interest as is currently the case.
- In 1998, the government consultation paper *Supporting Families* proposed a range of measures to strengthen marriages and families (such as wider roles for registrars in the provision of marriage preparation and information) but nine years later, very little government policy is directly preventative of family breakdown and lone parent family formation has, over the last quarter century, consistently increased by 40,000 families per year
- Research across 18 European countries indicates that one fifth of the increase in divorce rates over the last 40 years is due to the combined effect of legal reforms over that period
- Funding is focused on teenagers to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour and intervention in the early years of a child's life is couched in similar terms. Too few resources are targeted on the early years as part of a more positively focused effort to radically improve *life chances*



Aims and Objectives of Proposed Policies

In the light of these findings, policy must aim to build stronger families. State support should be provided in a way that encourages family networks to be self-supporting and well-rooted in the community and further strengthens the many families which are under pressure, but currently working well.

A body of policies which can fulfil this aim must have the following objectives and would:

Facilitate family stability and minimise family breakdown by encouraging healthy family relationships

- High levels of family breakdown across the socioeconomic spectrum indicate that many people are struggling to sustain healthy relationships. Parents are increasingly asking for some guidance on how best to raise their children. A tiny percentage of government money is spent on preventing family breakdown compared with its cost to society. Instead funding is focused on dealing with the effect of broken lives.

Build relational competence

- The collapse in marriage and committed relationships in many low-income communities means that many children and couples have seen no role model of permanence or exclusivity. These communities are characterised by high expectations (of relationships) and low capacities (to manage them well). Domestic violence, crime, pover-

ty and addiction corrode these neighbourhoods' social capital. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage is essential but requires tackling the high prevalence of psychosocial (including mental health) problems

Focus on the first three years of children's lives and assist families during other periods of vulnerability (which may be prolonged eg. when disability is a factor)

- A lack of nurture in the first 36 months can have lifelong consequences for mental health. Parents from dysfunctional families often struggle to provide this, perpetuating disadvantage. Fighting for appropriate care, help and support for a disabled child or adult can strain family relationships. Wide discrepancies in access to disability support services exist between and within local authorities.

Maximise community-level support and minimise dependence on the state

- Extended family relationships are breaking down and the state provides little or no support and encouragement for them to flourish eg. by making it financially viable for care of children and the elderly to take place within the family. Parenting and relationship support could be far more grounded in local communities and draw more on voluntary and community sector providers.

Send the message that every family matters, an essential complement to the more usual 'every child matters'

- The politically 'safe' emphasis on the parent-child relationship ignores the quality of their parents' relationship, a crucial dimension of child well-being. High rates of single parenthood mean too many fathers are missing out on active engagement in raising the next generation. Early fatherhood does not draw disadvantaged young men into dependable and responsible adulthood. A lack of purpose continues the cycle of worklessness, addiction and crime. Focusing exclusively on poverty and neglecting the couple relationship at the heart of the family will never shift these statistics.

Create a positive policy bias in support of marriage

- The tax system does not recognise the benefits which marriage brings to society and the tax credits system disincentivises adults from openly living together and encourages fraud. (The Government is paying tax credits and benefits to 200,000 more lone parents than live in the UK.) Comparative European research indicates that welfare benefits can drive up lone parent family formation and encourage solo living. Marriage has been downgraded in official discourse and increasingly undifferentiated from cohabitation despite marked discrepancies in the stability of married and cohabiting couples.

YouGov Polling (Apr-May 2007)

- 80%* agreed that it is better for pre-school children to be looked after by a parent at home rather than by a child-minder or day nursery, whereas only 29% of people agreed with the statement that we should be trying to encourage mothers to go back to work and contribute to the economy, rather than making it easier to stay at home
- Three-quarters* agreed or strongly agreed that public money should be spent on community-based centres which parents can visit if they want advice or guidance on parenting
- 86% agreed that 'People needing government-funded social care (e.g. due to illness or disability) should have the right to choose from a range of providers to find the one that best suits them'
- 96%* of people agreed with giving extra support for people to care for elderly relatives
- 80%* agreed or strongly agreed that extra support for marriage should be given in the tax and benefits system

* Of those expressing an opinion

- 76% agreed or strongly agreed that money should be available in the form of home care allowances, 52% that 'child benefits should be 'front-loaded', allowing parents to claim more of their child benefits in early childhood and less when children are older' and 85% that if parents receive money from the state to bring up their children they should be willing to attend classes if necessary.
- Over 90%* agreed with the statement 'Fathers are currently unfairly treated by the courts and not given the same rights, as a matter of course, as mothers' Only 22% agreed that fathers have adequate access rights and over 90% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Fathers should be forced to take more responsibility for helping to bring up their children after separation or divorce.'

Proposed policies to meet these objectives

Our proposals do not promote marriage *at the expense of* single parents but include many measures intended to support people in all types of families, for example by better integrating them into the communities of which they are a part.

To deliver greater family well-being and improve mental health we recommend:

- ***Family Services Hubs with an enhanced role for health visitors***
Facilities at the heart of communities to enhance current, community-based service provision, a greater degree of integration of services to maximise efficiency and coordination of professionals and voluntary sector providers. Five 'hubs' have been established which provide a good model for what we are proposing. Such hubs would **emphasise support for parents in their children's first three years with an enhanced role for health visitors** in preventing dysfunction in very young children's cognitive and emotional development. Intensive home-visiting programmes, like the Olds Nurse-Family Partnership to be implemented as a matter of priority (as much data will have already been gathered from pilots currently taking place)
- ***Enhanced support and training for professionals***
System changes to the child and family workforce (such as direct access to mental health professionals for young children, tiered access to family services, common inter-agency training and application of a coherent model of family support) to enhance effectiveness.

To roll out relationship education across the nation we recommend:

- ***A national relationship and parenting education 'invitation' scheme for couples and parents at key life stages***
Development and national roll-out of nine streams of relationship and parenting education programmes, operated locally by the voluntary sector through appropriate access points (including Family Services Hubs). **Universal and targeted services to access vulnerable families would reach 800,000 families every year** once full capacity is reached. Evidence from US programmes indicates high take-up: 100,000 completing marriage and relationship education programmes in Oklahoma since 2001 with positive effects (lower conflict, higher satisfaction, lower divorce risk) and younger, lower income respondents more - not less - likely than others to report interest in relationship education.
- ***A new Marriage and Relationships Institute (MRI)***
To act as champion and administrator of a major **series of preventative initiatives**, most notably the 'invitation' schemes, and commissioner of a major research programme into what makes marriages and families work.
- ***Relationship education in schools***
PSHE curriculum changes to provide a specific opportunity to learn about, explore and discuss the nature of marriage, family and relationships, with the **voluntary sector strongly encouraged to deliver many of these resources**.

To support families with disabilities we recommend:

- ***Creative ways for delivering more respite care***
Financial assistance for paying relatives and trusted friends (albeit at a lower rate). One stream of the ‘invitation’ scheme to provide **respite breaks for families** with disabled members, that include relationship and parenting support. Again, high levels of user satisfaction are reported in the US, where this is part of a state-wide initiative to stabilise family life
- ***Simplified access to disability support/services through specialised Family Services Hubs such as mobile clinics***
These would act as **one-stop shops**, providing or signposting to services so that the disability support system is simpler to navigate and families can more easily access the help they need
- ***Creation of a new compact between local authorities and the disability community***
A new relationship between local authorities and the disability community that draws on the latter’s experience and the expertise of user-led voluntary sector services with councils more accountable for services they provide. **Direct Payments (individual budgets) more widely available** and treated as cash in hand, with no strings attached, reflecting the shift in emphasis away from what is simplest and cheapest for a local authority towards what is most appropriate for an individual’s circumstances.

In reforming the welfare system to support the family we recommend:

- ***An increase in Carer’s Allowance and in the level of allowable extra earnings***
with a subsequent taper applied instead of immediate loss of all benefit. UK’s Carer’s Allowance is very low compared to other EU countries (last year Ireland greatly increased its Carers Allowance to £135 for one person being cared for and £200 for two people)
- ***A reduction in the couple penalty by enhancing the couple element in***
Working Tax Credit such that all couples receive the same ratio of support to lone parents as they currently get in Income Support (taking into account the additional adult). This would cost £3bn giving 1.8m couples with children £32.05 more, on average, per week. At present a couple receives the same level of WTC as a lone parent. This measure would contribute to stability (marriage is almost always preceded by cohabitation) and alleviate poverty (60% of families in poverty are headed by couples)
- ***A transferable tax allowance for all married couples (costing £3.2bn and giving £20 a week to those making use of it)***
The further stability (and social benefit) that marriage brings is recognised in this additional measure for couples, which makes it easier for one parent to stay at home in the early years if they wish, or for one partner to care for an elderly relative or volunteer in the community. Cheaper options are available such as transferring half the allowance, (costing £1.6bn) which would allow the usually non-earning spouse to earn £2.5k before paying tax. **The wider issue of the incoherence in the tax and benefit system also requires attention.** The unit of taxation is the individual, with little or no allowance for family dependants such as children, non-working spouses or elderly relatives whereas the unit of account in the welfare system is the family.
- ***Front-loaded child benefit (and future consideration of home care allowances)***
Making child benefit flexible so that a larger proportion of the child’s total entitlement would be available during the first three years when parents most want to spend time caring for their children and when attachment and



intensive nurture are most important (recommended by Frank Field MP). **Linking this where necessary to ameliorative services such as parenting support, could vastly improve the life chances of children most likely to experience deficits in parental care.**

To create genuine choice for families in the area of paid work and childcare we recommend:

- **A reduction in the current bias in the tax credit system against informal care** by allowing the use of childcare tax credit to pay **un-registered close relatives** (albeit at a lower rate) to reflect parents' preferences
- **Targeted assistance for parents who currently struggle to nurture their children** such as by offering therapeutic counselling (especially through community-based, voluntary sector providers) for carers and their babies within the first two years of the baby's life **rather than steering them towards local authority childcare.**
- **Removal of the bias towards state-provided childcare.** Private, voluntary and independent nursery providers face closure when local authorities establish their own subsidised facilities in areas where childcare needs are already adequately met. Partnership models should be more frequently adopted with local authorities signposting users towards existing provision. To free up Children's Centres to provide more family support we recommend that **childcare should be located outside community-based Children's Centres wherever possible.**
- **Easing of current childcare disadvantages for disabled children.** A higher rate of childcare tax credit to be available to pay for specialist services and higher staff ratio care. Local authorities to take active steps to encourage greater provision eg. by providing subsidised training for private, voluntary and independent nurseries



To support and facilitate cohesive families post-separation we recommend:

- ***Judges be specifically encouraged to reinforce the importance of contact arrangements***

The Judicial Studies Board to be directed to explicitly encourage judges to stress to separating parties the importance of abiding by arrangements, the possibility of being held in contempt of court through non-compliance etc., thus **increasing the likelihood that contact agreements will be honoured.**

- ***No exemptions for child maintenance applied to non-resident parents who are full-time students or whose income is less than £7 per week***

Exemptions undermine the principle that **every child's non-resident parent should be financially responsible** and pay something towards their upkeep (despite the CSA's inefficiency, the awareness of financial responsibility which its existence has engendered, is considered to be responsible for much of the 15% decrease in divorce rates since 1992).

- ***Information and services to prevent subsequent breakdown***

A restyled Child Support Agency should signpost people to information and services (eg. to Family Services Hubs) which can ensure that their future relationships stand a higher chance of success

- ***Improved access to justice to separating couples***

New fee structures for legal aid are driving many solicitors away from providing family law services, restricting future access of low-income people to justice. Family Services Hubs which co-locate and coordinate community-based services would either signpost people towards **centres providing a range of legal and quasi-legal services** or, depending on facility size, co-locate these services alongside other family support services (as in Australian Family Relationship Centres).

- ***A review of family law conducted by a dedicated independent commission***

The relationship between the law and family breakdown and legal aspects of marriage, divorce, cohabitation,

parental rights and the rights of the extended family (**especially grandparents**) are highly complex but require consideration. We recommend that this be carried out under the auspices of an independent body such as the Centre for Social Justice. We would say however that this report expresses grave concern over the negative implications of imposing rights and responsibilities on cohabiting couples. Notwithstanding individual cases of apparent injustice, many cohabiters have voluntarily chosen to reject marriage with the protection it provides. **The liberal argument that people should not be penalised for this choice is flawed. Attaching legal provision would be illiberal (because it imposes a contractual obligation not freely entered into) and intrusive and would encourage inherently more unstable relationships (but we await the Law Commission's forthcoming report).**

To ensure that family-centred policies are at the heart of local and national government we recommend:

- ***Cabinet-level political representation for the family***
Laming (2003) recommended that a ministerial Children and Families Board, chaired by a minister of Cabinet rank be established at the heart of government, with ministerial representation from government departments concerned with the welfare of children and families. As a first step, the **current Domestic Affairs Cabinet Committee for Parents and Children should be chaired by someone of cabinet rank**, its remit extended to cover the couple relationship and to consider inter alia the likely impact on families of all cabinet-level decisions.
- ***Reinstatement of the use of 'marital status' in government forms and statements***
Reinstatement and full public use of the term 'marital status' and associated terms 'husband', 'wife', 'spouse' and 'marriage', sending a clear and unambiguous signal about marriage. Marital status also to be reinstated as an independent factor in government-sponsored research.
- ***The compilation of local data on social cohesion***
A new statistical index of family and social cohesion is necessary. The Government's Social Exclusion Unit lists family breakdown as one of eight reasons for social exclusion and all seven other reasons are represented in indices of social exclusion. **Such an index would make individual local authorities accountable for addressing family breakdown in their boroughs.**
- ***Robust local government support of relationship and parenting education***
Just as local authorities must have a single commissioner responsible for assessing need and co-ordinating delivery of services to parents, a **senior 'champion' should also be similarly responsible for relationship education (with the same degree of importance placed on that aspect of their role).**

In using housing to promote security and independence for families we recommend:

- ***Investigation of the extension or pioneering of right-to-buy, rent-to-own and shared equity schemes to create asset-owning families***
Along with support for the most vulnerable in society, the social housing sector needs to be reconfigured once again to become a **runway for financial and personal independence**. Creative means should be considered for all social housing tenants to be able to build up capital within (and ultimately be able to purchase) the property they occupy.
- ***Reform of the current system of housing benefit***
Simplification of the system (which could move from being arrears-based to credit-based), and greater reliance on outreach workers to make new methods user-friendly for vulnerable families.
- ***Introduction of flexibility into secured tenure in social housing***
A proportion of social housing is occupied by tenants who have gained sufficient financial security to no longer require such assistance or are 'under-occupying' eg. their families have 'flown the nest'. New tenants could be moved onto a more flexible tenancy arrangement which takes changes in circumstances into account

- ***A commitment to increasing 'supported housing' projects***

Vulnerable families are often unable to manage households. Targeted support which helps them move towards self-sufficiency is an **investment that repays itself many times over in terms of saved costs for failed tenancy** eg. hospitalisation, resettlement, addiction treatment etc

Conclusions

We believe that the tide of family breakdown (dysfunction, dissolution and dad-lessness) can be turned. Our policies pay particular attention to the needs of our youngest citizens, those in the first three years of life where the nurture of their parents is of prime importance. We want all children to grow into relationally competent and confident adults. As one expert respondent told us, **'Marriage is the natural consequence of two adults being able to commit to each other because their own emotional development is secure and has given them the necessary confidence.'** We unashamedly support an institution that can be so beneficial, but acknowledge that there is much preparatory work to be done to improve the relational health of the nation, especially in communities subject to multiple disadvantage.

FAMILY BREAKDOWN WORKING GROUP

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ABOUT THE SJPG

The Social Justice Policy Group was commissioned by Rt Hon David Cameron MP, Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, in January 2006 to make policy recommendations to the Conservative Party on issues of social justice.

The Policy Group is chaired by the Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP, former leader of the Conservative Party and Chairman of the Centre for Social Justice, and its Deputy Chairman is Debbie Scott, Chief Executive of Tomorrow's People. The Policy Group's Secretariat is hosted by the Centre for Social Justice.

The work has been done through six working groups, which have examined key "pathways to poverty": family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency, indebtedness and addictions. A sixth group has studied how the third sector might be supported to do more to give vulnerable people second chances and help them escape poverty.

For further information, or to download the full report of the Social Justice Policy Group, *Breakthrough Britain*, please visit www.poverty.debate.com

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