

Forgotten Families?

The vanishing agenda

A policy paper by the Centre for Social Justice

October 2012



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Summary

In the vital area of family policy, the Coalition Government has been characterised by a lack of boldness and clarity of purpose which contrasts sharply with their approach to education and welfare reform. This short paper will lay out why it is not enough to encourage firms to grant flexible working and improve paternity leave, make childcare affordable so parents can work and endorse an annual Family Week. All these are valid to some extent but they do not tackle the overriding priority of family policy which is best summed up in one statistic – 48 per cent of all children born today will see the breakdown of their parents' relationship.¹

We look briefly at statistical indicators, which show our social trends are heading in a direction that is contrary to the stability children need to thrive, and the outcomes that tend to prevail when families do break down. We then consider how and to what extent government policy is addressing this massive social problem and demonstrate the considerable public support, across the income spectrum (and in different types of families), for making it a priority. This Government has shown real commitment to the Early Intervention agenda we have championed since 2007 and the Social Justice Strategy's emphasis on the need to address family breakdown is also very welcome. However, the importance of marriage has been neglected yet it is indispensable for fostering a culture that values stable relationships. Finally, we lay out key areas where the Government could make a greater impact, and develop a more strategic lead, most notably by establishing a Department for Families.

Working from this solid base, the Government can develop a range of measures to address father absence, intervene early and effectively to support couple relationships and ensure local authorities also prioritise strengthening families. They can also communicate clear and explicit support for committed relationships and send the clear message that increasingly unstable families are not an inevitable fact of twenty-first century life.

Introduction

Thriving families and stable childhoods should be the foundations on which we build a better Britain. Strong families are the seedbed in which other reforms can take root. Yet there has, over the last 40 years, been an escalation in family breakdown (divorce and separation, father absence and dysfunctional relationships) and our research has shown that it is our poorest communities – and children – that have been most affected.

While they were in Opposition, the Conservative Party repeatedly talked about the importance of the family, how they would prioritise family strengthening policies if elected and the need to support marriage and commitment and tackle family breakdown. David Cameron has reiterated this as Prime Minister:

'I have always made it clear what I think about the family. I think families are immensely important. I am pro-commitment, I back marriage and I think it's a wonderfully precious institution... Strong families are the foundation of a bigger, stronger society... There's a

¹ Projections based on Census, British Household Panel Study and Millennium Cohort Study

whole body of evidence that shows how a bad relationship between parents means a child is more likely to live in poverty, fail at school, end up in prison or be unemployed in later life... Unlike the last government that focused almost exclusively on children, we have had the courage to say loud and clear that if you want what is best for children you have to address not just children but families and relationships too.²

Despite popular support for this emphasis – as has been shown in repeated waves of polling carried out by the CSJ – half way through the Parliament it has disappeared almost without trace. This has happened before.

Many have forgotten that at the 1995 Labour Party Conference Blair said 'a strong society cannot be morally neutral about the family' and in 1996 he referred to 'the development of an underclass of people, cut off from society's mainstream, living often in poverty, the black economy, crime and family instability' as a 'moral and economic evil.'³ Not long after he came to power; however, family instability, the hot potato of social policy and arguably the root cause of wider social breakdown, was dropped from this formula.

While the feminists in New Labour's Cabinet are popularly blamed for the last Government's lack of effectiveness in this area, the tug of war compromise within the Coalition tends to be cited as the reason why progress has stalled again. This paper is an urgent call particularly to the Conservative Party, and to David Cameron himself, to seize control of the family agenda and deliver the changes he envisaged in Opposition.

In order to do this, and given the scale of problems which modern families are facing, which we lay out below, we reiterate the call we made in 2010 that there be a Department for Families.

A Department for Families

We believe that families are the bedrock of strong societies. In order to recognise this and truly champion and support family life, we believe that the Department for Children, Schools and Families should be divided into the Department for Families and the Department for Education.⁴

Such a Department would take a firm grip on a range of issues currently spread across several different parts of government and provide a strong strategic lead within Cabinet. These could include, for example: family law and relationship support; Cafcass; child protection and social services; domestic abuse; youth justice and the wider youth agenda; families' and children's mental health; and issues relating to older age. This would be the ideal department in which a Minister for Older People would operate, given the strong link our recent Older Age Review established between family breakdown and poor outcomes such as isolation, loneliness and pensioner poverty.

Basing all these policy areas in a Department for Families would better enable issues to be dealt with by taking a family perspective. Our research suggests this would be more effective than current approaches to many of the issues referred to in the preceding paragraph in which individuals are often treated in isolation.

2 Speech given by David Cameron on the Big Society, 23rd May 2011, [accessed via <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speech-on-the-big-society/>]

3 Quoted in Sassoon AS, *Gramsci and Contemporary Politics: Beyond Pessimism of the Intellect*, London: Routledge, 2000

4 Centre for Social Justice, *Green Paper on the Family*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2010, p18

A dedicated Department for Education is essential to realise the ambitious scale of school reform currently being undertaken and which we endorse, not least because major planks of that reform programme – such as free schools and the Pupil Premium – were key recommendations in our seminal 2007 report, *Breakthrough Britain*.

However, given the magnitude of the challenge, family breakdown (and other major issues facing families) can never be adequately tackled by tagging ‘the family’ onto other agendas. In fact, opportunities to put families at the forefront are repeatedly being missed, despite this Government’s pledge to make this the most family-friendly country in the world. For example, the Public Health Outcomes Framework⁵ makes no explicit mention of the importance of family factors despite the family’s key role as a social determinant of health (see box below) – and in particular the poor public health outcomes flowing from family breakdown. Moreover, fiscal policy is focused on increasing individual tax allowances rather than on helping lower income families/households.

Greater instability ahead

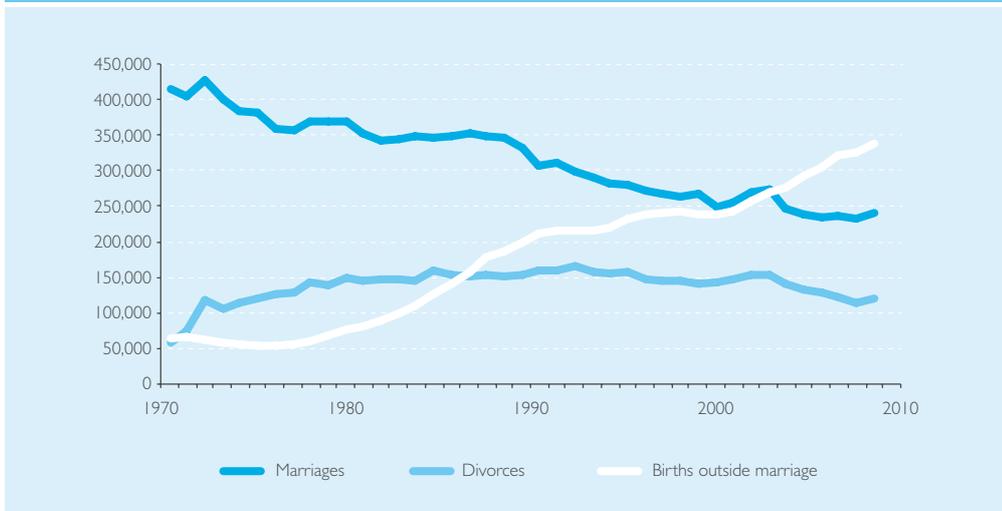
Recent analysis of the 2011 Census makes it clear that many of our social indicators are pointing towards more, not less, unstable families, and this is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

- In 2011 two-thirds of the UK’s families were made up of married couples, a drop of five per cent since 2001;
- There has been a three percentage point rise in cohabiting couple families – up from 16 per cent in 2001 to 19 per cent in 2011 – and a rise of two percentage points in lone-parent families (from 14 per cent to 16 per cent);
- These increases are related: cohabiting couple families are less stable and more likely to result in children growing up in a lone-parent household;
- It is the breakdown of unmarried parents’ relationships that is the biggest problem: the number of divorces has been declining since they peaked in 1993;
- Without addressing these trends, only 57 per cent of families would be headed by married couples by 2031, with 22 per cent by cohabiting couples, and 20 per cent by lone parents; if this rate of change were sustained, married couple families would become a minority within 35 years.⁶
- We are already seeing high rates of father absence and this looks set to get worse – one commentator has noted that, by the end of childhood, a youngster is considerably more likely to have a television in his bedroom than a father living at home.⁷

⁵ Department of Health, *Healthy lives, healthy people: Improving outcomes and supporting transparency*, Crown Copyright, 2012

⁶ All Census-derived statistics in this section from Grainger D and Hanna E, *Changing Family Formations*, Cooperative Legal Services, 2012

⁷ Based on a survey carried out by ChildWise research agency that found 79 per cent of children aged 5–16 had a television in their bedrooms (cited in Margo S, *The Good Sleep Guide for Kids*, Vermilion, 2010). See The Telegraph, *Charity shouldn’t begin at home for Save the Children*, 7 September 2012

Figure 1: Marriage, divorce and births outside marriage⁸

Current policy efforts to address these trends

There are some promising signs that this Government is prioritising stable families, such as the recently published Social Justice Strategy⁹ which highlights their importance in providing the foundation for every child's life and giving them the best start. The strategy also explains why the Government should support families to stay together. The DfE has established a Relationship Support Division, spending £30 million over four years to encourage stable couple relationships and help couples whose relationships are breaking down.

There has been a significant and welcome shift towards funding prevention of breakdown within this budget line. Our 2011 report card on the Coalition examined their progress in tackling the country's deep-rooted social issues and criticised both the level and emphasis of spend.¹⁰ While no additional money has been committed by the DfE, spending on relationship support until 2015 will be focused more on prevention.

Moreover, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is investing £20 million in information and support for separating parents to help both of them stay involved in their children's lives and make workable financial arrangements. The Ministry of Justice has mandated obtaining access to information about mediation before filing for divorce and is overhauling the family justice system.

While we applaud all that this Government is doing to help separating parents part more amicably, in the best interests of their children, we are concerned that the overriding need to prevent family breakdown from happening in the first place may have been shelved as a

⁸ Source: New marriages, divorces and births outside marriage, ONS

⁹ Department for Work and Pensions, *Social Justice: Transforming Lives*, London: Department for Work and Pensions, March 2012

¹⁰ Centre for Social Justice, *Building a Social Recovery? A first year report card on the Coalition Government*, London: Centre for Social Justice, 2011

priority. This is in spite of the Coalition Agreement pledge to 'encourage shared parenting from the earliest stages of pregnancy'.¹¹

Despite these initiatives, current government effort is dwarfed by the scale and cost of family breakdown in this country and is one of Whitehall's best-kept secrets. We have written extensively about the need for the Government to take a strong and vocal lead in tackling the 'culture of relationship breakdown' through every available means, including the law, the tax and benefits systems, and frontline services that are already working with families.

An unsustainable burden on wellbeing, family finances and the public purse

Family breakdown costs society £44 billion a year¹² and is associated with a range of poor outcomes for adults and children: educational failure, mental and physical ill-health, likelihood of becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol, and living in debt and poverty. Many commentators would agree that poverty contributes to family breakdown but they are less comfortable about acknowledging the converse – that family breakdown *leads* to poverty.¹³

- After a marital split, the income of women with children falls on average by more than a tenth (12 per cent), while separating fathers' available income actually increases – by around a third (31 per cent).¹⁴
- Children in lone parent families have a much higher risk of living in poverty than children in couple families. 41 per cent of children in lone parent families live in households with the poorest 20 per cent of incomes, compared to 22 per cent of children in couple families.¹⁵
- 28 per cent of children in lone-parent families live in relative poverty, in households earning less than 60 per cent of median income, compared with 17 per cent of those in couple families.¹⁶

It is also associated with other concerning outcomes:

- Children of separated parents (in comparison with those whose parents remain together) are at increased risk of:
 - Growing up in poorer housing;
 - Experiencing behavioural problems;
 - Performing less well in school and gaining fewer educational qualifications;

11 Cabinet Office, *The Coalition: our programme for government*, London: Cabinet Office, 2010, p40

12 Relationships Foundation, *Counting the Cost of Family Failure 2012 Update* (Research Note 12/01), Cambridge: Relationships Foundation, 2012

13 Although see for instance McKay S, *The Dynamics of Lone Parents, Employment and Poverty in Great Britain*, 2002 and Holmes J and Kiernan K, *Fragile Families in the UK: evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study*, Draft Report, June 2010

14 Jenkins S, *Marital splits and income changes over the longer term*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 2008

15 Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income, An analysis of the income distribution 1994/95–2009/10*, Table 4.14ts, London: Department for Work and Pensions, 2011

16 Department for Work and Pensions, *Social Justice: Transforming Lives*, London: Department for Work and Pensions, March 2012, p6

- Needing more medical treatment;
 - Leaving school and home when young;
 - Becoming sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an early age;
 - Reporting more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence and adulthood.¹⁷
- The disadvantages of one generation tend to be reproduced in the next. The children of divorced parents are estimated to be twice as likely as children of non-divorced parents to experience divorce themselves.¹⁸

Public support for tackling these issues

We conducted two waves of polling over a 12-month period and found that:

- 83 per cent of the British public thinks family breakdown is a serious problem; over a third thinks it is very serious;
- 75 per cent believes that stabilising Britain's most troubled families would help society as a whole;
- 75 per cent thinks fatherlessness is a serious problem, almost a third thinks it is very serious;¹⁹
- Nine out of ten mothers consider it important that a child grows up living with both parents, six in ten thought it was very important;
- Over half of lone mothers thought it was important that a child grows up living with both parents – one in five lone parents thought it was very important;
- Almost two-thirds of step-parents thought it was important and a quarter of them thought it was very important.²⁰

Parents from across the social spectrum and parents who are not still together acknowledge the benefits to children of intact families. They also want the Government to take a strong lead:

- Over 80 per cent of parents from social class DE (where there are the highest levels of family breakdown) agree that the Government is right to say that stability matters for children;
- Three-quarters of lone parents and almost nine in ten step-parents also agree that this is an appropriate and necessary message for Government to send.²¹

17 Mooney A, Oliver C and Smith M, *Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being, Evidence Review* London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, June 2009, p7

18 Amato PR and DeBoer DD, 'The Transmission of Marital Instability across Generations: Relationship Skills or Commitment to Marriage?' *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 63, 2001, 1038–1051

19 CSJ/YouGov polling of 2,084 adults, September 2011

20 CSJ/Bounty – the Parenting Club polling of 1,828 mothers (either expectant or with children under two), July 2012

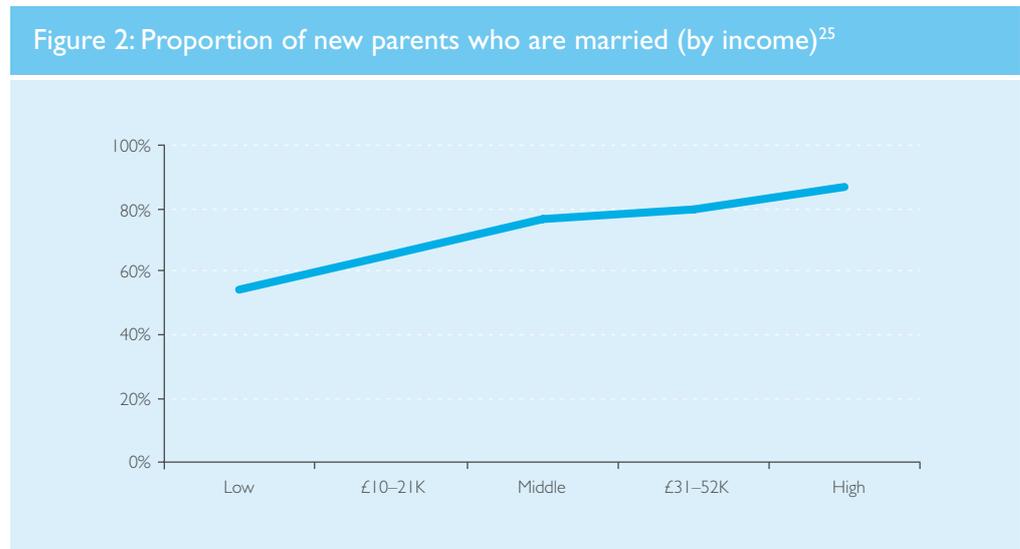
21 Ibid

Importance of marriage

If the Government is to be effective in emphasising stability and the importance to children of growing up with both parents, it cannot afford to be neutral or non-committal about marriage:

- 97 per cent of all couples still intact by the time a child is 15 are married;²²
- Fewer than one in ten married parents have split by the time a child is five compared with more than one in three who were not married. Where parents were not living together when a child is born, the break-up rate (five years later) is a staggering 60 per cent;
- 75 per cent of family breakdown involving children under 5 results from the separation of unmarried parents.²³

The 'selection effects' argument (i.e. that those who marry tend to be better able, from the outset to make relationships work, because they have higher incomes, better education, more social support etc.) is inadequate to explain these significant differences in outcome. Moreover, marriage is a social justice issue; aspirations to marry are similarly high across the social classes but further down the ladder it becomes harder to realise those aspirations for economic and cultural reasons.²⁴



Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study (see Figure 2 above) reveals there is a social gradient in marriage – poorer parents are less likely to be married. This matters because their children are more likely to experience relationship breakdown and go through more 'relationship transitions'

22 Analysis of 2001 Census data: on a subsample of 451,468 families with children, there were 13,676 intact married couples with 15 year olds and only 456 intact cohabiting couples with children. (We have been informed that comparable data from the 2011 Census will not be released until Summer 2013.)

23 Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study corroborated by Goodman A and Greaves E, *Cohabitation, marriage and relationship stability*, IFS Briefing Note BNI107, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010

24 de Waal A, *Second Thoughts on the Family*, London: Civitas, 2008

25 Source: Millenium Cohort Study (MCS, Wave 3)

as their parents re-partner, break up and re-partner again. The emotional difficulties they go through make it harder for them to do well at school, obtain and hold down a good job, and build good economic and relational foundations from which to raise their own children.

If the Government constantly emphasises the obvious truth that families come in all shapes and sizes, and ignores the differences in outcome from different types of families, they short-change those in many lower income communities who already face high barriers to marriage – as well as young people who consistently express high aspirations to marry.²⁶

In a recent debate in the House of Lords, Lord Patten made clear the urgent need for the Government to be explicit about the benefits of marriage, particularly exhorting the Prime Minister:

'to continue to say in the clear language that he is so good at that he supports marriage and to encourage those of his Ministers who feel the same way to pump out the facts again and again like hamsters on the oratorical wheel until they are more understood in the intervening years between now, when I believe that critically important expenditure reductions must continue, and when it should surely be possible to spend a bit more on marriage support in future'.²⁷

What the Coalition should do about family breakdown

It is not just the policies government sets, but also the messages it sends that influence people's behaviour. Strong families make for strong societies and ministers have a responsibility to articulate that. The Government only tends to talk about families in terms of acknowledging their financial needs. The work they are doing to prevent family breakdown (itself a major drain on family resources) is rarely mentioned – suggesting this is not a particularly important aspect of their agenda.

For example, the DfE is already funding community-based programmes that combine antenatal education with information about relationships and is inviting further bids for innovative work to normalise the take up of relationship support.²⁸ Society needs to know that this is a priority for the Coalition. 44 per cent of the mothers we polled agreed that they began to argue more with their baby's father after the birth, and three quarters agreed that relationship tips should be part of the advice people get when they have a baby. Support for relationship education was consistent across the socioeconomic spectrum, with the same proportion of parents from social class DE agreeing that this should be part of ante- and/or post-natal care.²⁹

Encouraging strong and stable families can be done through early intervention with the most vulnerable, supporting relationships, and removing the significant barriers to couple formation (and marriage) which can make it financially difficult to raise children together.

26 70 per cent of 20 – 35 years old 1,560 adults aspire to marry (Ipsos-Mori poll May – July 2007). An earlier poll found 89 per cent want to get married in Opinion Research Business, *Young People's Lives in Britain Today*, London: The Opinion Research Business, 2000

27 House of Lords Hansard text, 10 Feb 2011, Col 362 [accessed via: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110210-0001.htm>]

28 Department for Education, *Relationship support services procurement exercise 2012–15*, London: Department for Education, 2012

29 CSJ/Bounty – the Parenting Club polling of 1828 mothers (either expectant or with children under 2), July 2012

The following measures communicate and help to build support for a culture of marriage, commitment and two-parent families (without in any way criticising or penalising lone parents).

Supporting stable relationships

- Protect investment in Universal Credit now and in the next spending review for addressing the couple penalty.
- Introduce a transferable tax allowance for married couples. While we recommend the implementation of a transferable tax allowance for all married couples in the long-term, in the current financial climate this should be staggered and married couples with children aged up to three treated as the priority.

We give costing options in the Appendix to this paper, all of which are lower than the £6.5bn price tag the IFS has put on bringing forward to 2014–15 the Government's pledge to increase the personal tax threshold to £10,000.³⁰ We have written elsewhere that, as 70 per cent of the benefit of the transferable tax allowance proposal goes to the poorest 50 per cent of families, this is a more progressive fiscal policy than raising personal allowances (which give the greatest cash gains to the second-richest tenth of the income distribution).³¹

- Given the importance of parents' relationships to ensuring their children get a good start in life, the prospective Early Intervention Foundation proposed in the recent Allen Reviews should research the most effective relationship stabilising and education programmes.³²

Early years and public health

Sure Start Children's Centres, and other family service 'hubs' should strengthen families and help prevent family breakdown by:

- Providing preventive relationship education (pointers that help prevent problems) and support at key points in a couple's relationship;
- Supporting families in difficulty by working with them, where possible and appropriate, to resolve conflict and find solutions to challenges;
- Supporting separating families in achieving workable parenting arrangements which are in the best interests of the children without the need to resort to the courts. As well as mediation, many couples need therapeutic support to enable them to think beyond litigation for resolving their disputes. The funding desert for legal aid heightens the need to increase awareness of such alternatives.

30 IFS, *A £10,000 personal allowance: who would benefit, and would it boost the economy?* March 2012 [accessed via <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6045>]

31 Centre for Social Justice, *It is time to back marriage*, London: Centre for Social Justice, February 2012

32 Allen G, *Early Intervention: the Next Steps*, London: Cabinet Office, 2011

It is also vital that Children's Centres do more to provide families with advice to avert issues that can impact on children's wellbeing and also, ultimately, on family functioning and stability. Our research has shown that diet and nutrition tend to be neglected, yet these can profoundly affect children's health, behaviour, and ability to learn – and unhealthy families tend to be unhappy families. We call for:

- More support and information for parents on basic nutrition and healthy eating for toddlers, and for better training for all Health Care Professionals (HCPs) in child and especially toddler nutrition (echoing calls from the Infant & Toddler Forum, an independent group of HCPs);
- More group classes on how to cook inexpensive healthy meals, and obtain fresh and affordable fruit and vegetables. Although healthy eating is cited in the Government's core purpose for Children's Centres as an example of where activities for parents can be focussed, it should feature more strongly given its overriding importance. The DWP's Child Poverty Pilots found that where group classes were provided, for example in Children's Centres, on how to cook inexpensive healthy meals and obtain fresh and affordable fruit and vegetables, these were popular.³³

The role of the family as a key social determinant of public health

A nutritious and balanced diet in the pre-school years is vital for future development not least because 70–90 per cent of child and adult obesity is already established by the time a child starts school.³⁴ Sound nutrition can also help to protect against other problems such as rickets (which has become more common again) and tooth decay. Establishing good eating habits early in life can help prevent diseases which emerge in middle and older age such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers. The potential public health gains from a healthy diet are considerable.

However, we found that clear guidance and information, especially for parents of toddlers, can be hard to find – and to put into practice. Many young parents have no role models to learn from and it is essential that those working in Children's Centres, GP surgeries and other support services are willing and able to give detailed advice and hands-on training where necessary.

In our polling we found out that while two-thirds of mothers who have weaned their babies found the information they received on feeding easy to understand, fewer than half found this information to be consistent. Although 90 per cent said they had some confidence in how to give their babies a healthy diet, only around 60 per cent of mothers were confident they could get portion sizes right as their children grew older. This has clear implications for tackling the nation's worsening problems with obesity.³⁵

Family law

- The Final Report from the Norgrove Review recommended that there be no change to the Children Act 1989 to state explicitly the principle that there is a benefit for children of each parent having a significant involvement in their lives (alongside the need to protect

33 Department for Work and Pensions, *Helping Families Thrive, Lessons learned from the Child Poverty Pilot Programme*, London: Department for Work and Pensions, 2012

34 Gardner DS, Hosking J, Metcalf BS, Jeffery AN, Voss LD, Wilkin TJ, *Contribution of early weight gain to childhood overweight and metabolic health: a longitudinal study* (EarlyBird 36), *Pediatrics*, 123, 2009, e67-e73

35 CSJ/Bounty – the Parenting Club polling of 927 mothers (with children under 2), July 2012

the child from harm). The Government has correctly criticised this conclusion and has recently consulted on amending the Children Act with a view to including a presumption of shared parenting.

- The Government need make no reference to substantially shared or equal time, but must enshrine the important principle outlined above given the worrying levels of father absence in the UK today. One in seven babies is born into a home with no resident father³⁶ and on an ongoing basis 30 per cent are not living with both parents.³⁷ (Given that, in 2011, 92 per cent of lone parents were single mothers, the overwhelming majority of absent, or at least non-resident, parents are fathers.³⁸)

Local Government must ensure relationships are at the heart of the 'Troubled Families' agenda

- Intensive help for our most chaotic families must include couple relationship support. Adults in all types of families (including single parents) need tools to help them break intergenerational cycles of family breakdown.
- They should also consider family fostering programmes (such as those run by Save the Family) which offer residential support to families with children at immediate risk of entering care for preventable reasons and intensive round the clock support to address the issues behind the need to take children into care.
- Although we welcome the requirement in the national Child Poverty Strategy for local councils to develop their own strategies, they should collect data on relationship status so they can demonstrate the effectiveness of their strategy to stabilise relationships in their area. This would drive the provision of a wide range of relationship support and other measures, beyond the Troubled Families agenda.

Conclusion

This Government's lack of a clear and coherent strategy to strengthen UK families not only contrasts starkly with their early and sustained action to reform welfare and education, but also threatens to undermine gains in these other vital policy areas. The Social Justice Strategy is a welcome sign of progress in its recognition of family breakdown as a key driver of poverty, but strong leadership is required to tackle this issue at a high level in government.

A Department for Families, led by someone who has the vision and ambition to address family breakdown, would greatly bolster current efforts to strengthen families especially in our poorest communities. This is essential for the social recovery that must accompany economic growth.

36 Kiernan K and Smith K, 'Unmarried Parenthood: New Insights from the Millenium Cohort Study', *Population Trends*, 114, 2003, 26–33

37 Wilson B, Children with a non-resident parent, 2010, *Population Trends* 140, 53–81

38 Office for National Statistics, *Statistical Bulletin, Families and Households, 2001 to 2011*, London: ONS, 2012

Appendix

Costing options for a transferable tax for marriage, all of which assume the prospective 2013–14 basic tax rate/tax threshold of 20 per cent/£9,205:³⁹

- Married couples with children under three years old, the most important years for a child's development: £0.85 billion;
- Married couples with children under six years old: £1.44 billion;
- Married couples with dependent children or in receipt of Carers Allowance: £2.4 billion;
- All married couples: £5.13 billion.

³⁹ All figures based on estimates from the IFS supplied to the CSJ in 2007 and 2009 which have simply been adjusted to take forthcoming changes in the personal income tax threshold into account

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