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PICKING UP SIGNS, NOT PIECES

THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SUPPORTING PARENTING

ROUNDTABLE WRITE-UP

SARAH STOPFORTH

In collaboration with Action for Children, NLGN hosted three roundtable discussions on the role of local government in supporting parents. The first two discussions were held with councillors at the Labour and Conservative party conferences, and the last was held with practitioners and officers in London. This paper is the outcome of these discussions.

SETTING THE SCENE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PARENTING

The importance of good parenting in a child's development, health and wellbeing is widely recognised in policy and in practice. Family support is crucial in a child's formative experiences, not just materially but in terms of love, support and general wellbeing, in cognitive and non-cognitive development.¹

However, what constitutes 'good' parenting is highly ambiguous. Children do not come with an instruction manual and parenting is not an innate skill. There is societal pressure to 'get it right' instinctively. Parents who struggle to do so often feel they are "failing" their children emotionally, putting their well being and safety at risk. While plenty of support mechanisms exist within the community and online, seeking these out is not always easy and can

sometimes be accompanied by a sense of stigma. Supporting parents to support their children is a difficult task made harder by the pressures from society and those parents put on themselves.

The role of government in this can be highly problematic. The strength and timings of interventions are crucial. Too much too soon can be viewed as paternalistic and characteristic of the 'nanny state'; however, too little too late can end in escalation of problems and even tragedy for children and their families, and scandals for which governmental bodies, whether national or local, are then held accountable. Local government officers have to tread a fine line between being perceived as either interfering busybodies or as too laissez-faire and, potentially, blasé. Intervening in any way and at any stage can have political repercussions for councils and long-term implications – for good or ill – for families and children.

Due to severe budget cuts, many councils have rolled back their services to the statutory minimum, taking a much more targeted approach to provision. Universal services were seen to reduce the stigma of needing support. As these are reduced, that stigma may well be seen to increase.

As budget cuts reduce the extent and reach of existing services, only those with the highest needs will be supported. This leaves little leeway in terms of financial capacity for

¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (January 2010), *Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper*.

an early intervention and prevention agenda for those with only low to moderate needs. However, widespread early intervention and prevention is crucial. For hard-pressed public services, this is critical to managing demand downstream. But more importantly, for parents and their children, addressing a problem before it starts to impact negatively on the family is essential for the stability and security of the family and child.

Central government once recognised this through the Early Intervention Grant. However, due to austerity measures, this has been cut by at least 50 per cent in all local authorities since 2010-11.²

Central provision, which was made as a grant allocation until 2013-14, is now part of the revenue allocation to local authorities. As such, it is now subject to cuts within individual local authorities. This will become a very real challenge after the announcement in the Comprehensive Spending Review that core central government funding to local government, including revenue support grant and business rates, will fall by 24 per cent in real terms between 2015-16 and 2019-20.³ As councils come under increasing budgetary pressure, early intervention funding will increasingly feel the pinch.

² National Children's Bureau (2015), *Cuts the Cost: Trends in Funding for Early Intervention Services*, available at http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/1222509/ncb_cuts_that_cost_report_final.pdf.

³ LGA (2015), Spending Review Briefing, available at <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6869714/On+the+Day+Briefing+SR+2015.pdf/fadcf449-c787-43c0-8648-1ccf403a9275>.

The Government has, however, set up the Early Intervention Foundation as a What Works Centre that invests in early intervention and family support, providing an evidence base, evaluations and policy analysis. This is much needed, especially as reduced resources mean that services are drawn back to the statutory minimum, funding streams to the direct line are cut and it becomes much more difficult to implement early intervention and prevention initiatives without prior sound evidence bases of success.

Unfortunately, there is no clear statutory obligation to deliver early intervention and so this has been an area where struggling councils have been forced to make major cuts. According to the Department for Education, there are three strands of early intervention spending: children's centres and early years' services, family support services, and services for young people. Between 2010-11 and 2014-15, 79 per cent of local authorities cut spending on children's centres, 57 per cent of local authorities made cuts to spending on family support services – which includes both targeted and universal services – and 66 per cent cut funding for young people's services.⁴

This is highly troubling for parenting support, because those people who find themselves struggling will not necessarily be those

⁴ National Children's Bureau (2015), *Cuts the Cost: Trends in Funding for Early Intervention Services*, available at http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/1222509/ncb_cuts_that_cost_report_final.pdf.

deemed in highest need and, therefore, will not be on the radar of statutory or even voluntary services. Support for parenting should start at the point of need. This is not just about the types of severe need that will be recognised formally, but rather those who are at risk of failing or just need an early but vital bit of support. Not all parents have the knowledge, strength, self-assurance or time to seek help, and many may not even be aware of exactly what support is available. There is an important role for local government to play in enabling parents to access support, taking a nurturing approach and encouraging help to happen as early as possible.

THE POLITICS OF SUPPORT: EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

Early intervention and prevention should not be a political football, but with dwindling finances it is often a casualty in the battle to secure regular investment. In balancing local authority budgets, it is hard enough to make an argument in favour of ‘invest to save’ measures like early intervention, without the added complication that investment by the council may lead to cost savings elsewhere in the public and voluntary sectors, and won’t necessarily be realised by the council itself. As the outcome for the family is the primary driver of early intervention, these

complications should not prevent councils investing in it.

Despite limited financial resources, investment must be made in the best interests of the service users rather than organisations who serve them. To do this will require being much clearer about what outcomes councils are trying to achieve, and making these the focus of action. A crucial part of this is smarter thinking about existing resources and utilising assets much more effectively. For example, investment is relatively safe in the fields of education and health. Additionally, existing capacity within the voluntary sector and community can be tapped to provide extra or better targeted support for parents.

There is a new role for local government in moving towards a more collaborative public service model which needs to be explored and embraced. Local authorities are well-placed to play an enabling role, and act to broker relationships between different sections of the public sector, as well as enabling professionals to provide support upstream. This means a change from being a primary provider to a facilitator and commissioner of services and support. As budgets are reduced, councils must adapt to this new climate and ask themselves what role they can play in helping the system to adapt and providers to work together better. This will undoubtedly require an organisational shift away from local authorities working

in silos and a political shift towards early intervention and prevention. Such shifts are notoriously difficult to orchestrate and require strong will and broad buy-in from the strategic level right through to frontline staff in order to make them happen.

A NEW APPROACH? PEOPLE NOT PROGRAMMES

Person-centred services are the new vogue in the public sector, and rightly so. Wrapping service provision around the needs of the individual addresses them holistically and cuts out duplication for providers and users alike. Joined-up working from social workers, health visitors, GPs, schools, childcare, voluntary and community sector organisations or any other service involved, can create a single point of access and assessment for the individual or family, and ensure that services are easily navigated by the people involved. Putting people at the heart of service provision prioritises their needs, not organisations' programmes, and provides better quality services as a result.

Supporting parents is about listening to what people need. It is all too easy to put people and problems in a box, to provide a programme which addresses an assumed set of needs, and to then simply move on to the next family in need of support. For example, children who have been victims of abuse can be pigeon-holed and offered a service which

does not necessarily address their personal outcomes. When talking to this child, it may well become clear that what they actually want is to do better at school, have stronger relationships with parents and carers, and have fewer nightmares. If a service is too prescriptive it will miss these goals in dealing solely with the abuse and not its wider consequences. Prescribing a programme to address the problem rather than provide tailored solutions is not always an effective approach. Although it may address the immediate issue, it may not address actual need from the perspective of the child, parent or family.

Furthermore, even if a programme the right approach, any number of reasons can prevent a person from engaging. For example, associated stigma or reluctance to admit to a problem, lack of time to attend a class, or even excessive transport costs or physical distance can prevent parents from seeking the support they need.

THE ROAD AHEAD: COLLABORATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

A truly person-centred approach is achieved when organisations consider the outcomes desired for and by the individual their number one priority. This means putting the targets of the organisation to one side and

de-emphasising structures and processes in favour of focussing on lived outcomes for individuals. It involves putting the needs and wishes of children and families at the heart of any programme of support while also taking into account any practical or perceived barriers to its success. This will mean a major culture shift: from processes to outcomes, and from organisation-centred delivery to family-based activities. This is about not projecting assumed outcomes onto people but listening to the words they say, engaging on a regular basis, and tailoring an approach to support in a way that will best help them achieve their goals.

With person-centred service provision, there is an overwhelming need for organisational silos to be broken up. If support for parents is to be holistic, organisations must work together to identify where help may be needed and wrap support around individuals; this will involve collaboration between the council, the voluntary and community sector, health professionals, teachers and school support staff and other public sector organisations. Some organisations will have multiple interactions with children and parents on a daily basis. If every organisation is only solving one piece of the puzzle, problems that are not the remit of one single organisation can slip through the net and potentially escalate downstream. There is a need to be smarter about these partnerships in looking at the whole person or family, instead of their constituent issues.

Fundamentally, these organisations will already have unique and trusted relationships with the general public and individual families, and may already be intervening in their lives. Expertise will never be concentrated in one area or public service, but the mutually beneficial nature of partnership working seems often to be understood in theory by the relevant organisations, and very difficult to implement in practice.

Partnership working will involve a cultural shift within systems. Many collaborative efforts fall by the wayside when obstacles are presented. Just three of these, discussed at length in the roundtables, were evidencing and proving what works, data sharing arrangements, and language barriers.

EVIDENCING AND PROVING 'WHAT WORKS'

Evidencing what works is essential to override the tendency for councils to crisis manage and deal in the here and now, as opposed to looking to longer-term outcomes. In a climate where there is a constant need to keep innovating, and in the face of severe budget cuts which challenge current thinking, there is a resistance to trial and error for reasons of uncertainty, dwindling resources, and perceived risk.

While businesses are able - within reason - to learn from failure, the electoral cycle makes this much harder for democratically elected and accountable politicians.

Implementing new initiatives requires an assurance of success and value for money. Councils are looking for solid evidence of positive outcomes. There are some approaches which are well-evidenced and known to have positive impacts, and there are other approaches which are generally considered 'just common sense'. However, the evidence of what works must also be balanced with what is financially possible. For example, it is well-established that one-to-one tuition in listening to children read is very beneficial to the development of literacy. But this is very costly for schools to implement and so is not as widespread as it could be. By contrast, a number of delegates mentioned variations on reading schemes they have in their areas, like free books sent in the post to all children aged 0 to 5, which costs considerably less, but still encourages parents to read to their children, which has a huge positive impact on their cognitive development.

However, robust evidence building needs to consider local variation in success because what works in one place is not guaranteed to work somewhere else. It also needs to take into account that what works will differ for different communities and with different families. For example, if parents never learned to read, providing the household with free books will have limited success, and there are wider issues to address to encourage the parents to develop their own skills as well.

DATA SHARING AGREEMENTS

A key stumbling block to partnership working is risk aversion around sharing data. The rules around data protection do have concessions when the individual has given consent for data sharing and if the sharing of data is in the person's best interests. However, the perception of legal risk in sharing data remains a key barrier to partnership because of misunderstandings of the law as well as a genuine fear around safeguarding.

With information sharing comes issues of accountability and sometimes blame shift. On the one hand, people can be passed around the system to different professionals 'like hot potatoes'; but on the other hand, professionals do not always want information shared with them because it adds to their caseload, without them getting the additional resource or capacity needed to respond. Understanding the value of data sharing and the possibilities it opens up could truly benefit families at the centre of a myriad of systems. Without such sharing there is more duplication of services, actions and conversations. With siloed services individuals often have to repeat their stories to every professional they meet, and there is a danger of creating a revolving door where there is a belief that someone else will take charge, with the risk that no one does. Without proper data sharing amongst public sector workers, children and families can easily slip through

the net, and there are opportunity costs around thinking in organisational silos rather than putting people at their centre.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS AND ASSOCIATED STIGMA

As budgets and services are cut back, and services can no longer be universal, how we approach them must be well thought through. Targeted services, by their very nature, can have an aura of stigma attached, and the way in which families are engaged is important to ensure they are encouraged and not alienated. Language and stigma are closely intertwined, and when considering the approach to take, the words used must be carefully chosen to avoid further isolating service users. An interesting example of this is the 'Troubled Families' approach. Most councils have created their own names for this programme because of the degree of stigma attached to the word 'troubled'. Instead, councils have opted for the more positive language of 'thriving families', 'supporting families', 'stronger families' or 'changing lives' programmes (amongst many others).

If targeted provision of services is the route taken by councils as a response to budget cuts, then the approach taken is of utmost importance. In general, the non-judgemental approach taken by charities is successful when reaching out to families and parents who may not consider themselves to be struggling, but might benefit from some

support. Charities have a unique role to play in harnessing community resources which will be welcomed by individuals who may not want to present themselves or their problems to social workers, schools or more formal state intervention mechanisms. This is where councils need to be wary of their 'brand'. A council worker intervening in family life may be associated with children being taken into care and barriers may be constructed to keep the council out. On the other hand, a charity worker may be perceived to lend a more sympathetic ear, or able to connect members of the community together in a more neighbourly approach. The role of local government in supporting parents is sensitive: councils must know when it is appropriate to intervene, and when it is appropriate to take a backseat and enable charities, communities and neighbours to work together.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of local government in supporting parents is tricky. On the one hand, they are best-placed to commission services and provide holistic support to individuals and families. On the other hand, their 'brand' and reputation may – fairly or otherwise – instil a sense of fear in parents who associate social workers with taking children into care. This can put them off asking for even the lightest-touch support.

There is a very important role for councils to embrace in enabling a whole systems

shift towards person-centred care. Putting the child first, in terms of wants and needs, and supporting parents to do what is best for their children should be priority number one. As facilitators, councils can invest time and resources into partnership working to enable the professionals on the frontline to do their jobs effectively. However, as council budgets are stripped right back and services become targeted towards those with the highest needs, councils should be wary of the dangers associated with early intervention and prevention slipping down the priority list.

At the heart of the public and voluntary sectors are the individuals they are seeking to help: this must be remembered and used to bring organisations together, rally around successful outcomes for families, and overcome some of the stubborn obstacles in the way of partnership working. Most important of all, organisations should be looking to pick up the signs, not the pieces, intervening at the right point in their approach to supporting the holistic wants and needs of children and their parents.

THE VIEW FROM ACTION FROM CHILDREN

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Parenting is a sensitive issue. Public debate around parenting tends to fall into two categories – what good parenting is and what we should do about ‘bad’ parents. All of this tends to be played out at extremes and from the perspective of adults. Am I good parent? Is it my fault my child isn’t a genius? Whose fault is it that this parent hurts their child?

Action for Children wants to start from a different perspective – what do children need? This is hardly a revolutionary approach but too often, especially when it comes to politics and public policy, the needs of children are side-lined.

At Action for Children we believe that every child should have the chance to reach their potential. To do that they need safety, love, an environment that nurtures their physical and emotional wellbeing, security and consistency. In their early years, it is their parents who will largely supply this.

Yet every parent needs support. Being a parent is hard and nothing prepares you for the reality. It’s not an exact science. It’s demanding and unrelenting. But most parents

are able to say it is also the most satisfying and wonderful responsibility in the world.

Lucky children have an extended social network, able to offer time, help and the moral support their family needs. Those from better-off households will be supplied with vast amounts of qualified support – whether in the form of child minders, tutors, music lessons or after-school clubs. Some will have deeply engaged and informed parents, who can talk for hours about the merits and disadvantages of structured play or development theories.

So why can it be so hard for parents who most need support to get it? The simple answer is that the state has not yet acknowledged its vital role in the provision of accessible, non-stigmatising support for every child from before birth. We have policies about the provision of childcare, the quality of children's centres and readiness for education. But we have not yet said out loud that giving every child the best possible chance of a safe, loving and nurturing home is not only a private matter – it is also a public one.

This is not about prescribing parenting standards – every child and every family is different. It is about building a vision for the outcomes we want for our children and considering it a shared endeavour to meet them. This requires children to be visible and prioritised, something which cannot be achieved purely from the privacy of the home. It becomes possible when communities

are resilient and public services are freely accessed – a local and national effort.

National governments need to sign up to a set of outcomes which represent the results of a decent childhood – consistently measuring physical, emotional and social development – and political parties need to back them over the long-term. Only then will we see national policy and local provision that pursues these goals consistently, sheltered from the harsh winds of political change.

The debates in these round tables were striking for the degree of consensus we heard from different political and professional perspectives. This gives me hope that ensuring all children have a decent childhood will one day be widely regarded as a basic requirement of our society.

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