

‘Troubled Families’ in a Spin

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On 25 November 2013 the Department of Communities and Local Government issued a Press Release, widely covered in the both print and broadcast media, claiming that the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) was ‘on track at the half-way stage’. It was accompanied by statistical data from each Local Authority, purporting to show that ‘18 months in to the 3-year programme over 62,000 families are being worked with and over 22,000 have been turned around: with children back in school; levels of youth crime and anti-social behaviour significantly reduced; and over 1,400 adults from some of England’s hardest-to-help households now in continuous work’.

The statistical release accompanying this puff for the TFP paints a rather different picture. Indeed, the more closely these figures are examined, the more peculiar they are. Rather than showing the success of the programme, they suggest that local authorities are using the ‘estimates’ of the numbers of families issued to them in late 2011 as targets in order to qualify for the attached funding. And given how cash-strapped local authorities are as a result of imposed cuts, one can hardly blame them.

To recap, the DCLG and other government bodies have repeatedly claimed that there are 120,000 ‘troubled families’ in England. *There may be ‘Trouble’ Ahead: what we really know about those 120,000 Troubled’ families*¹ gives a detailed analysis of the origin of this mythical number. At a very rough estimate, in 2004 there were about 117,000 families who suffered five out of seven forms of deprivation: no parent in the family is in work; the family lives in overcrowded housing; no parent has any qualifications; the mother has mental health problems; at least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity; the family has low income (below 60% of median income); the family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items. Independent estimates suggest that those figures fell between 2004 and 2008, but will have risen substantially since then as a result of Coalition policies. The amount of money taken away from the poorest families as a result of cuts in benefits and other support far outweighs the amount invested in the TFP.²

The main point of *There may be ‘trouble’ ahead* is that figures relating to severe multiple deprivation have nothing to do with the target group for the TFP. The TFP ostensibly addresses families who are: involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour; have children who are excluded from school or regularly truanting; have an adult on out-of-work benefits; and cost the public sector large sums in responding to their problems, an estimated average of £75,000 per year. (The £75,000 average is based on a claimed £9bn annual cost of troubled families, but repeated Freedom of Information (FOI) requests

have failed to elicit exactly how that figure is arrived at.) The DCLG then divided up the putative rounded-up 120,000 between local authority areas in England, using a formula derived from the Index of Multiple Deprivation and the Child Well-Being Index, giving each area a figure for the number within their remit. Tabloid headlines screamed about the numbers of ‘families from hell’ in their area.

Even if the original 120,000 figure had in fact applied to so-called troubled families, and even if the apportionment to local authorities were accurate, one would not expect them to be exact. One would expect that some local authorities would find rather more and others rather less than the estimated number, with relatively few finding the precise number suggested. But while overall 92,694 of an estimated 118,082 families have been identified (an overall level of 78 per cent), not one single area has identified more families than estimated by the DCLG. Almost a quarter of local authorities (37 of 152) have identified *exactly* the attributed number, ranging from 2 in the Scilly Isles to 2,630 in Lancashire and 2,385 in Manchester; a further 22 have identified 85 per cent or more of their given estimate. This pattern suggests that the estimate is being treated as a target. Indeed, this is what the DCLG intended: ‘the total number of families on the list should match the indicative number of families that were [*sic*] sent to you in December 2011’.³ The financial structure of the TFP reinforces this tendency. While a total of £4000 per family ‘turned around’ is available from the DCLG, a large proportion of this is payable upfront as an ‘attachment fee’, which can be claimed simply by identifying a family as part of the programme and starting to work with them. In 2012/13, 80 per cent of the fee was payable upfront, i.e. £3,200 per family. The incentive to ‘get with the programme’ was built in to the funding structure, since the amount payable in advance reduced to 60 per cent or £2400 for 2013/14, and will drop still further in 2014/15 to 40 per cent, or £1600. The balance of the £4000 is available on a payment-by-results basis. The DCLG guidance also suggests that because not every family will be successfully ‘turned around’, local authorities may need to work with *more* cases than the indicative numbers to meet their targets, which oddly contradicts the suggestion that the number identified should correspond to the target estimate. However, the DCLG has recently claimed that there are 400,000 high risk families who might potentially be targeted by extending the TFP into the next Parliament. An FOI request for the basis of this figure has been refused.⁴

The incentive to identify families as potential candidates for the TFP is clearly considerable. But when the scheme was first launched, several local authorities thought the projected numbers far too high. In October 2012, the Local Government Chronicle reported that many were struggling because of the discrepancy at the heart of the scheme – that is, the difference between the criteria that generated the 120,000 figure, and those of the TFP itself. One presentation in February 2012 suggested, for example, that Birmingham would be able to find only 7 per cent of their estimated 4,180 cases using all three substantive criteria. In July 2012, the three boroughs of Westminster,

Kensington and Chelsea and Hammersmith and Fulham Councils had reportedly found just 32 families meeting the TFP criteria, against the 1720 attributed by the DCLG.⁵ By October 2013, the date to which the November 2014 press release refers, that figure had risen to 1267 of an estimated 1730,⁶ with Hammersmith and Fulham locating 517 of their attributed 540 families, or 96 per cent.

How could local authorities be so wrong about the numbers of eligible families in their areas? Not only is there a built-in financial incentive to find them, but they do not, in fact, have to conform to the principal criteria of the TFP at all. Local authorities are specifically encouraged to use additional discretionary criteria to target families who meet two of the three core criteria. 'Local discretion is very important, so there is a fourth filter for you to add in other families you are concerned about'.⁷ Early in 2012, Birmingham were considering adding free school meals take up, adult offenders at risk of re-offending, those in treatment for drug & alcohol problems, and Child Protection Plan Cases. On this basis they were 'confident we can identify 2,600 families this year and the remainder next year'.⁸ The DCLG themselves suggested targeting those with emotional or mental health issues or long-term health conditions.⁹ It is not clear what additional criteria (if any) have in fact been implemented in the identification of 2,837 families in Birmingham, some 68 per cent of the original estimate. Nor do we know what criteria have been used in other areas to boost the figures to the level prescribed in the original target. It is unlikely that the criteria are the same for all local authorities, and the guidance implies that they ought not to be. An FOI request submitted by Stephen Crossley to ascertain what discretionary filters had been used by individual authorities received the response that while the DCLG did hold this data, it was not in the public interest to release it at the present time, although it will eventually become available as part of the DCLG's own evaluation of the TFP. Thus 'On balance, I do not consider that the wider public interest would be better served by releasing the information now. Accordingly, I am withholding the information that you have requested until its publication later this year'.¹⁰ This is similar to the reasons given to David Gordon for not releasing the details of the claimed £9bn cost, which have in fact never been published; a subsequent report on The Cost of Troubled Families did not address the detailed questions set out in the FOI request.¹¹

Local variation in the criteria used to identify troubled families generates statistics that are not comparable across the board. Indeed, this is also true of the core national criteria of educational absence and exclusion, and crime and anti-social behaviour. The Department for Education's definition of 'persistent absence' was changed in 2011 from 20 per cent to 15 per cent absence, widening the pool of affected children from 184,000 to 430,000 each year. These figures include severely disabled/sick children who miss school due to ill-health. But as Stephen Crossley points out, guidance to local authorities includes the following recommendation: 'We expect that colleagues in local authorities and schools will adopt a common sense approach. Based on evidence of worrying levels of non-attendance, head teachers and Troubled

Families Coordinators should apply their professional discretion to identify children whose patterns of attendance are of equivalent concern to those set out in the existing criterion'. Similar local flexibility actually exists in relation to anti-social behaviour: 'In order to ensure that you are able to include families who are involved in anti-social behaviour, you should use comparable measures or interventions according to your local approach to anti-social behaviour. This may involve working with, and drawing on the information of, a range of local partners including police, landlords and council colleagues to make sure you find families of concern.'¹²

Then there is the question of what constitutes success. By October 2013, a total of 62,527 families had been 'worked with'. 22,104 had been 'turned around' (meaning the local authority would be claiming the payment-by-results element of the funding). This represents roughly a third (35 per cent of those worked with), a mere 24 per cent of those identified, and only 18.7 per cent of the estimated total – hardly a rip-roaring success in the DCLG's own terms. Moreover, in a mere 1,430 cases was the outcome successful in terms of getting someone into continuous work. (The meaning of continuous work is not specified in the TFP financial framework.) That is a mere 2.3 per cent of families worked with, 1.5 per cent of those identified, and 1.2 per cent of the putative total. In Sheffield, which identified its full complement of 1680 cases and had begun work with 961 of these (and presumably therefore claimed between 2 and 3 million pounds in attachment fees), not one person had moved in to continuous employment. Is this overall figure of 1.2 per cent better than nothing? Probably not. It only constitutes success for the TFP if it significantly exceeds the results of making no intervention at all. Evaluations of the Work Programme suggest this is not the case.

Most of the vaunted success of the TFP lies in the 20,674 families recorded as showing improvement in terms of educational attendance and/or reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour. Ostensibly, the criteria here are that each child in the family has had fewer than three fixed exclusions and less than 15 per cent of unauthorised absences in the last 3 school terms; *and* there has been a 60 per cent reduction in anti-social behaviour across the family in the last 6 months; *and* the offending rate by all minors in the family has reduced by at least a 33 per cent in the last 6 months.¹³ As noted above, local authorities had the power to vary the definitions of absence and anti-social behaviour. The published results relating to education, crime and anti-social behaviour are aggregated, making it difficult to see what is going on. For although success appears to depend on meeting all of these thresholds, that applies only for that minority of families that qualified for the TFP on all counts, not those who are included for other reasons. Moreover the families are presented as 'successes' if there has been either movement in to work or a reduction (not cessation) in school absence and offending or anti-social behaviour. In families where anti-social behaviour and offending were not an issue (because the family did not meet all three criteria in the first place) they will be deemed successful simply on the education criterion.

At best, these figures demonstrate 'success' in just over a fifth of the families worked with (22.3 per cent). But again, there is no indication of how many children from the wider pool would in the normal course of events have improved attendance, nor how many young people commit misdemeanours or are reprovved for anti-social behaviour and do not repeat this. To make any sense of these figures, we need comparable data on likely outcomes without the intervention of the TFP. That means statistical data, not, as is so often the case in relation to the troubled families agenda, scare-mongering anecdotes from extreme and unrepresentative cases.

The data is being presented as heralding a great success when it is extremely difficult to assess whether it shows anything at all. But these issues are important for other reasons. Each one of the families identified by a local authority in its quest for this small supplement to its income is being labelled and stigmatised as not just troubled but dysfunctional. This is unethical and offensive to the individuals concerned. One mother contacted me to say that she had been targeted by her local authority as a troubled family, and implicitly as a bad parent. Why? Because she was receiving Carer's Allowance to look after her teenage daughter who had been seriously ill; the daughter had consequently been unable to attend school for a year; and her son had once, aged sixteen, been reprimanded by the police.

Neither the quality of these statistics, nor the political claims made for them, bear scrutiny. The DCLG includes in the press release the telling phrase 'These do not constitute official statistics'. The 2007 Statistics and Registration Service Act defines official statistics to include 'statistics produced by ... a government department' and 'such other statistics as may be specified by order by ... a Minister of the Crown'. Since the figures were collated from returns from the 152 upper tier local authorities, so they were not 'produced' by the DCLG, even if the Department was responsible for placing them in the public domain and trumpeting them as evidence for the TFP's success. More importantly, the 2007 Act also set up the statistics watchdog, the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA), which among other things has 'a duty to monitor, and report publicly, on areas of concern about the quality, good practice, and comprehensiveness of all official statistics across Government and its arms-length bodies'. Although local authorities might be considered to be 'arms-length bodies', the real meaning of denying that these are official statistics is that they have not been assessed by *and are not subject to* the scrutiny of UKSA: the DCLG does not want to be held to account either for the quality of the data or its political (mis)use. One might add that the target figures were themselves produced by the DfE for the DCLG, and thus do constitute official statistics. An FOI request from Paul Spicker concerning the £9bn costs attributed to troubled families also elicited the response that this data did not constitute official statistics.¹⁴

The DCLG has form in this kind of disavowal, again in relation to the TFP. In July 2012, they published Louise Casey's *Listening to Troubled Families* report with a great fanfare.¹⁵ As Nick Bailey notes in *Policy based on unethical*

research, the stated aim of the Casey report was 'to inform [government] thinking and policy development', while Secretary of State Eric Pickles hailed it as providing 'real insights into these families' lives' and as offering a 'true understanding of the challenges local authorities face'.¹⁶ My own *Still not listening* comment on the Casey report notes how profoundly unrepresentative and misleading it was.¹⁷ Bailey, however, went further. He first placed an FOI request for the ethical protocols, which were not forthcoming, and then made a complaint about the unethical nature of the research. He was told that the report did not constitute research, and was therefore not subject to the ethical scrutiny and standards with which government research is meant to comply. The original report had said in the small print that 'this is not formal research'. But it plainly was research, and was used by the DCLG as evidence in support of the TFP.

This habit of using disclaimers to avoid the ethical and substantive quality controls on government data is at least as worrying as the misinformation that is being disseminated about the TFP, and by implication about the causes of poverty.

- ¹ Ruth Levitas, *There may be 'Trouble' ahead: What we really know about those 120,000 'Troubled' families*, PSE Policy Series Working Paper No.3, April 2012.
<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/WP%20Policy%20Response%20No.3-%20%20%27Trouble%27%20ahead%20%28Levitas%20Final%2021April2012%29.pdf>
- ² Howard Reed, *In the eye of the storm: Britain's forgotten children and families*. A research report for Action for Children, The Children's Society and NSPCC, June 2012
http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/4012135/in_the_eye_of_the_storm.pdf
- ³ *Financial framework for the Troubled Families programme's payment-by-results scheme for local authorities*, DCLG, March 2012, p.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/11469/2117840.pdf
- ⁴ Stephen Crossley, <http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2013/10/05/high-risk-families-and-decision-based-evidence-making/>
- ⁵ Rhiannon Bury, 'Figures cast doubt on troubled families estimates', *Inside Housing*, 11 March 2013
<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/care/-figures-cast-doubt-on-troubled-families-estimates/6522922.article>
- ⁶ This is not a misprint. The discrepancy between the later figure of 1730 and the earlier 1720 is probably the result of the October 2013 figures being rounded to the nearest 5 and the three local authorities being listed separately.
- ⁷ *Financial Framework for Troubled families*, p. 3
- ⁸ Bridget Kerrigan and Tony Bunker, *Identifying and Working with Troubled Families in Practice*, Birmingham City Council
<http://ssrg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Bridget-Kerrigan-and-Tony-Bunker-Birmingham.ppt>
- ⁹ *Financial Framework for Troubled families*, p. 5
- ¹⁰ Letter from Rachel Lundy, Troubled Families Team to Stephen Crossley dated 11 February 2014 in response to FOI request.
- ¹¹ *The Cost of Troubled Families*, DCLG, January 2013.
- ¹² Stephen Crossley, 'The 'troubled families numbers game'', 17 January 2014,
<http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2014/01/17/the-troubled-families-numbers-game/>
See also <http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/what-does-turning-around-a-troubled-family-really-mean/>
and <http://akindoftrouble.wordpress.com/2013/12/03/400000-high-risk-families-policy-making-by-estimate/>
- ¹³ *Financial framework for Troubled Families*, p. 9
- ¹⁴ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/publication_of_official_statisti
- ¹⁵ Louise Casey, *Listening to Troubled Families*, DCLG, July 2012
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6151/2183663.pdf
- ¹⁶ Nick Bailey, *Policy based on unethical research*, 25 October 2012
<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/news-and-views/articles/policy-built-unethical-research>
- ¹⁷ Ruth Levitas, *Still not listening*, 24 October 2012
<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/articles-families/still-not-listening>