

# Think Family: launch of the second report of the Families At Risk Review

Transcript of remarks by the Rt. Hon. Ed  
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Can I start by welcoming everyone here today to the launch of the second stage of the Families at Risk Review. I am delighted to be here with Gillian Merron with whom I work with on these issues, and with Beverley Hughes from DCSF – and I want to put on record my thanks to Beverley and DCSF for their fantastic support and work with us and the Social Exclusion Task Force.

I'm a newcomer to this area in the last six months or so, and have been trying to learn fast from Naomi and others.

I'm delighted to be here and to be associated with this, and I just want to say four things, about what I think the challenges are that this project is talking about; what progress we've been making; what the approach is to respond to the challenges outlined in this document; and how we can move forward together.

So what's the challenge? The challenge is basic and profound for anyone involved in progressive politics, which is helping some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

This came home to me in Tower Hamlets on Tuesday, when I went to visit a Family Intervention Project. It's a great example of what can be done about profound problems of inter-generational poverty and disadvantage.

I had the chance to sit in on a case conference of someone in their early twenties, who had been a teenage parent and had had their kids taken away from them because of all kinds of things that were happening in the family. And when you asked about the family's history, it was all about the fact that this woman was herself the child of teenage parents. The kind of upbringing she had had meant that she hadn't been taught any kind of parenting skills, hadn't been given the love that she needed. And what was very interesting for me was that trying to reach back into the roots of this is very difficult, and it defies conventional stereotypes, and it's a question of a whole set of economic, social and cultural problems, all of which are inter-related and which are incredibly difficult to disentangle.

The profound moral challenge is about the upbringing of the children and the fate of the children, and also the life chances of the mother who was being discussed. And it's a challenge for our whole society, and not just a moral challenge but an economic one because we know that there is huge wasted talent and we also know the social consequences of not addressing these problems.

So my first point is that there is a profound moral challenge here. It is, and I think I speak for the three of us when I say this, the kind of thing we came into politics for and the kind of problem we came in to tackle.

The second question is what kind of progress have we been making, and I guess Beverley will want to say something about this too.

I think it's really important not to succumb to a counsel of despair on these issues. When you see these problems – and I know people in this room deal with them every day – you think these are profound and intractable problems. But you also see something like the Family Intervention Project, and the difference that can be made simply from agencies coming together. And this is really interesting to me: the Family Intervention Project was a catalyst not just for providing specific help for the woman that I'm talking about, but was also a catalyst for bringing different agencies together. So the Housing Department was in the room and was talking about how can we get this lady into a house, which will mean she's taken away from some of the bad influences that were around her and she can get back on the road to having her kids come back to her – which was something that was now looking like a possibility and had not looked like a possibility before the FIP came on the scene. And it was profoundly encouraging that you saw all these agencies coming together and working together.

So that's my second point: yes, these are profound and difficult problems but they are tractable problems. They are problems that can be dealt with and can be tackled with the right sort of support for parents, and that is the encouraging thing we need to hold onto, and not succumb to the notion that these problems can never be tackled, that they will always be with us.

And when you think about what the Social Exclusion Unit and now the Social Exclusion Task Force has done, working with people in this room, around teenage pregnancy, around rough sleeping, around a whole range of issues, you'd know that these very difficult problems of multiple disadvantage can be tackled.

The third question, then, is what's the relevance of the Families at Risk Review to the problems that we're talking about?

It seems to me that the insight, which again has been gained from people in this room, is that Every Child Matters found a way to bring together services and bring together agencies in a much more – and it's a terrible phrase which I promised I'd never use – but a much more joined-up way. Now we need to try and do the same thing for adult services. There's lots of good practice around the country. It is done in lots of places but we need to find a much better way to bring together the work done by adult services, and also bring together adults' and children's services to be working much better together.

We boil all this down to four principles which try to guide us and which you'll see in the document.

First of all there should be no “wrong door” for services. If you go and talk to the Housing Department but you clearly have some other problems and issues as an adult, you should be offered help with those problems. You’re not just seen in a silo, you’re not just seen in terms of the specific housing issue you face: professionals have an awareness of the other help that you might need around health, around work, around all kinds of other things that might help you.

Secondly, the service should think about the adult not just as an adult but also as a parent, if they are a parent. And I’ll be honest with you: as someone coming new to this, I am surprised by the extent to which adults can often be dealt with as adults, but the fact that they have children – whether it’s a criminal justice issue and they’re finding themselves going to prison or whether it’s a mental health issue – the fact that they have children is ignored. I’m not in any sense blaming professionals for that but I think there’s a profound cultural shift that needs to take place around thinking about the family as a whole family and thinking about the adult as a parent, not just as an individual.

The third thing, again learnt from people in this room, is you’ve got to build on the family strengths. You’ve got to find a way in which yes, they do get support but also they are supported to get on the right road for themselves. In a way I think what struck me about the Family Intervention Project was that it was about finding what are the strengths of the family, how can the family be encouraged to see that it has strengths, see that it can make progress itself with the right support.

And then the fourth principle, which though it’s a rather an obvious thing is important, is that the service needs to be tailored to the needs of the family and needs to be oriented around the specific needs of the family.

Now these seem to me to be four pretty basic principles but too often for a whole range of reasons they’re not necessarily implemented.

So that’s the approach that this document is embodying.

The final question is, how then do we make progress with these principles?

What I’m really pleased about is that the DCSF has led this but other government departments have also worked with us too, and you’ll see in the document a set of recommendations and a set of proposals that we’re going to take forward to address issues around government, and try to break down some of the barriers to implementing these four principles.

But at the centre of us learning how to put these principles into practice are the Family Pathfinder projects that we’re launching the prospectus for today, which will involve 12 to 15 local authorities. There is £16 million kindly provided by our friends at DCSF to make this happen. And I think one really important thing to say about this is that often government departments set up pilots and then you feel that they go away and say, “we’ll see you in three years’ time”. That is absolutely not the intention of this. We want to learn from the word go what these Family Pathfinders are telling us, not just about how these principles can be rolled out to other local authorities but what is it that we should be changing in central government. We need to be learning from these Pathfinders on the ground to make change happen and there’s a real commitment, expressed by the 9 government departments that are involved in this, to make this a reality.

So that's the broad approach that we're talking about today. I am delighted not just that we've got Beverley and Gillian but we've also got four people who know far more about these issues than I do who will be talking to us a bit later.

Let me just end on this point. I came into this job in June and I think at my first meeting with Naomi she said to me "Look, the key to this is systems reform." And I'll be honest and candid on this, I thought "systems reform, that sounds a bit boring really". But what I have learned about this in the last few months is that systems reform may sound boring but it is potentially the key to transforming hundreds of thousands of people's lives. That is the prize that is available to us. We acknowledge and we know that we can't do this on our own. This is not about central government being able to do this itself. We need the partners in local government, we need partners in the third sector, we need partners in other government departments and other agencies too. So I am delighted that people have come today and spared the time to be with us and I look forward to working with you over the coming months and years to help transform hundreds of thousands of lives.

Thank you very much.