



Stories of Family Life

Exploring the experiences of families in
Manchester

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Innovative Social Investment
Strengthening communities in Europe



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Overview

The UK [Troubled Families programme](#) is a national, systematic approach for working with families that are experiencing multiple problems. The method that the Troubled Families programme advocates is the adoption a 'whole family' working approach that puts family intervention at the heart of the support services whilst still addressing specific problems experienced by individuals within the family unit such as low attendance at school or unemployment. Previous support service provision had failed families with complex needs because it was provided in silos and in a reactive manner. It has been funded partially via a payment-by-results model that was 'designed to incentivise an outcomes-based approach'.

To gather user voice on this programme we worked with a small group of families from Manchester who have experienced support provision as part of this new approach. Their stories provide rich insights into their experiences of family life, identifying some of the issues they are facing (i.e. health problems), support they are accessing and seeking (i.e. peer support networks), and also their thoughts on the future (i.e. studies).

The importance of listening to people

In her story, [JL](#), a mother of four children aged 5 to 12 from Manchester, UK, explains how social services came to her home and suggested that attending a parenting programme would help her become a better parent. JL did feel that she needed some support, stating, "*that's why I was on the parenting course, to find help*", but this was not to be the case. She felt that rather than trying to support her individual needs as a parent, the programme instead was more concerned with following guidelines set out in an American book on which the programme was based. JL found the course "*quite patronising*" and she "*didn't really get much from it*". She explains how attendees were rewarded with stickers for making contributions in-line with the programme's teachings, and how she felt that she was treated like "*a school child*" and was "*presented with a load of rules*". However, JL did value the social interactions that the course provided between herself, the other attendees and trainers.

Much of the sentiment in JL's story is echoed by [Clara](#), another mother from Manchester, UK, who too has received interventions and support from social services. In her story, Clara explains how she feels that the attitudes of the professionals who are involved in her family undermine her own abilities and "*tell her what to do*".

This behaviour makes Clara feel like the professionals think she “*doesn't know her left from her right*”. Clara’s daughter, Vanessa, a teenager studying to become a social worker herself, agrees that the top-down approach by professionals involved in both her mother’s and JL’s stories, is not necessarily the most effective way to build relationships with people. In her story, [Vanessa](#) explains how she would like more of a “*friendship*” with her social worker, rather than it being “*strictly professional*”.

Understanding the complexities of people’s lives

JL, Clara and Vanessa’s stories give us an insight into what their families’ lives are like and their individual experiences of support provision. What is clear from their stories, is that the issues in their lives are multiple and complex. When [JL](#) talks about her family life we gain an understanding of the difficulties that she faces that include a custody battle, her child’s on-going health issues and a close family relative’s substance abuse problem. She also details how these issues impacted on her own mental health and contributed to a breakdown. Similarly, [Clara](#) recalls how social services became involved in her family life, due to an accident involving one of her children. During this moment of crisis it was felt that another child’s existing chronic health needs were not being met. Clara says that she feels “*bad*” about this intervention as she wasn’t “*given the chance to express herself*”, resulting in continued professional involvement in the family’s life.

The value of peer support networks

Whilst much of the interventions and support provided to these individuals has been seen negatively, the intervention that the family worker made for Vanessa, in terms of providing her with a mentor (a less top-down intervention), was well-received. In her story, [Vanessa](#) describes how she has a range of caring responsibilities within the family for her younger siblings and how this puts “*pressure*” on her. To ease this, the mentor has arranged for Vanessa to participate in a range of activities, providing her with some space and time for herself. As Vanessa describes, “*I think that was good because it gave me a break as well. It gave me a break away from my family, my sisters and college. I think that was a really big help.*” What Vanessa’s story suggests, is that support services can play a pivotal role in helping people to overcome the challenges in their lives, providing that the support being provided is in-line with what the individual’s needs and wants are.

In the cases where these families have not found support via more formal routes such as public services, they have instead relied on their peer support networks. In [JL’s](#) story, she states that if it wouldn’t have been for her family and their support, that she would have “*sunk*” due to the pressures she was facing.

Similarly, [Clara](#) found support in the congregation at her church. Talking about this she says, they've provided her with "a lot of support" and that "they've always been there for [her], more than the other professionals". The importance of these informal networks of support that family and friends provide is evident in a number of our Community Reporters' stories gathered as part of the InnoSI project. For example, [Jorge](#) who lives in Valencia, Spain explains how it is family members who are supporting people who are unemployed, not Government provision and [Sofia](#) (Athens, Greece), shared a story with us about a friend who is overcoming an abusive past partially due to the encouragement she has received from friends in terms of publishing her poetry.

[Click here](#) to view the extracts from these stories and [click here](#) to view the feature story.

InnoSI Themes

A key message from these stories is that **personalisation** is vital for support provision to be effective. The families who have shared their experiences with us, suggest that they would like support services and interventions to be much more person-centred and specific to their needs. A large part of [JL's](#) frustrations with the parenting programme was that she wanted something "more personal" than what was being provided, and Clara's frustration with the interventions being made in her family is very similar – she expressed how she just wanted her needs to be listened to. From these people's stories, the most effective interventions and support services are those that have been provided in dialogue with the recipients. [Vanessa's](#) experience with the family worker who "took an interest in [her]" and was instrumental in arranging her mentoring programme, is an example of this approach. This story highlights the effectiveness of the 'whole family' approach advocated by Troubled Families programme and the value in **early stage interventions** to mitigate the intergenerational transfer of issues and disadvantage.

Summary of Insights

- The Bigger Picture:** Recipients value whole family and interconnected support provision when it is done in-line with their individual needs.
- Personalisation:** Interventions and support services should be provided through dialogue with the recipients of it in order to personalise the provision. In essence, through co-design people can be engaged and empowered to be the catalyst of change in their own lives.
- Peer Support:** When support provision provided by formal structures and/or Government programmes are found lacking by their beneficiaries, these people are then likely to seek the support needed through their peers. These peer networks provide valuable forms of support for people.