

Councils took part in a pilot to reduce parental conflict because of the damage it does to children. As the initiative is to be extended, leaders came together to explain how they engaged agencies and practitioners in the programme

Councils develop programmes to reduce impact of parent conflict

SOCIAL CARE

By Joanne Parkes

Exposure to parental conflict is estimated to feature in the lives of more than 1.2 million children.

It is known to cause emotional and behavioural problems during childhood and impact on life chances.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) estimates that for “intact” families, 11 per cent of all children are affected by parental conflict, rising to 28 per cent in workless families. In separated families, half of children experience levels of parental conflict that are potentially damaging.

In an effort to tackle the issue and, in so doing, improve the life chances of children, the DWP developed its Reducing Parental Conflict Programme. It defined conflict as occurring “between parents or carers, that is frequent, intense and poorly resolved”.

Under the programme, local authorities developed innovative approaches to support local families. The pilots were run in two phases: phase one, involving 12 councils, looked at promoting family stability and relationship quality; and phase two, involving 10 councils, focused on reducing parental conflict.

The programme is currently being rolled out across England backed by £39m of DWP funding, including providing direct work with families to reduce conflict across 39 council areas.

Family support minister Justin Tomlinson explained that the programme will be available to disadvantaged and workless parents, “whatever the structure of the family”. He said: “Children who grow up with parents who have a good relationship and manage conflict tend to enjoy a range of better future outcomes.

“These are likely to avoid certain future costs to society, but what we’re really aiming for is to make

children’s lives better now.”

Service leaders from some of the pilot areas came together at a recent round table event to discuss key learning and how this can shape the roll out of the scheme, a summary of which is here.

The “lens” of conflict

At the meeting, there was a buzz of excitement when service leaders explained how the pilots had proved a catalyst for child-centred practice. Participants said the pilots provided the political and strategic backing to councils to help them decide the key areas for attention.

Clare Burrell, head of strategic commissioning and policy at Essex County Council, described how prior to focusing on conflict, a child who has benefitted from support may return to an unstable home environment and “the work is undone”.

Burrell said: “When the call [to be involved] was first put out, it was about family stability. When we first sat round the table, nobody really knew where this was going. But it was all our needs analysis around poor outcomes for children that led us to conversations about conflict with parents.

“Across the country, we all took it to this place that said ‘actually conflict’s a concern in terms of good outcomes for children.’”

Essex project manager Gaynor

PHASE 2 PROGRAMME COUNCILS

- Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council
- Blackpool Council
- Croydon Council
- Dorset County Council
- Essex County Council
- Gateshead Council
- Hertfordshire County Council
- Luton Safeguarding Children Board
- Newcastle City Council
- Westminster City Council



Family support minister Justin Tomlinson joins leaders at a round table event

Sproul felt the initiative has given practitioners “permission to look outside the lens” of domestic abuse when working with families.

However, not all the participants are convinced. Vijay Patel, strategic business manager at Luton safeguarding children board, raised a concern that focusing on parents may “risk losing sight of the child”.

Responding to this, Ben Lewing, assistant director of policy and practice at the Early Intervention Foundation, one of the scheme’s supporters, said: “I recognise the risk you’re describing, but it feels a low risk, because this is a programme about children. We’re using this lens to look at something we haven’t before.”

A simple question

Kim Knowles, referral gateway co-ordinator at Gateshead Council, said that asking a simple question like “how is it living with mum and dad?” is a good way to start the conversation.

She illustrates this with the story of a teenage girl whose parents had separated. The 14-year-old had an

eating disorder and at one stage she completely stopped speaking before being admitted for treatment.

The girl, who had been referred as a “child in need concern”, revealed that when she had contact with her parents, they would speak disparagingly about each other, but unwittingly describe characteristics she felt she had inherited.

“That really supported me as a case manager to work with the two of them, as a couple,” said Knowles. “They don’t like each other, they’re never going to be friends, but they’ve found a way to stop that name calling in front of this young person.”

Ruth Fennemore, development and commissioning manager at Hertfordshire County Council, agreed. “Often when a child is anxious, it can be there’s conflict within the home,” she says.

Joined-up thinking

Through the pilots, some councils have been training frontline staff to identify parental conflict.

Tomlinson wants schools to build on this to “spot people who’d

IN NUMBERS

1.2m

children affected by parental conflict

28%

of workless families experience relationship problems

£39m

provided by the DWP to reduce parental conflict

Source: DWP; Vulnerability Index, Children’s Commissioner for England, 2018

responsibility, not just early help”.

Welfare services staff at Croydon Council have been trained in this philosophy, said Karen Rasmussen, the local authority’s team manager for support and interventions. When speaking to parents about financial hardship, they know to ask: “How is it impacting on your relationship?”

To help embed this approach beyond the children’s workforce, Essex has engaged police, GPs and housing staff, including producing a film to explain the programme.

Burrell said the police had asked to use the video as part of its staff emotional wellbeing strategy. She added: “It’s amazing how everybody relates to being a parent.”

Harlow police have also been taking the resource out to low- and medium-risk callouts, she added.

Patrick Myers, assistant director of children’s services in Dorset and a senior ambassador for the programme, said housing is a crucial avenue for identifying need because “conflict puts tenancy at risk”.

Sproul added: “I’m conscious of missed opportunities in housing, in community-based settings where parents wouldn’t be targeted. That’s where we get all those things – like neurons that infiltrate everything else.

“I’m not that concerned about our targeted services in children’s [services] – it’s everything else that sits in our communities and hubs that we need to be tackling.”



Language of diplomacy

Sproul highlighted how terms such as “troubled families” are not well received and called for “non-judgmental language” to encourage participation.

Myers concurs: “I don’t think any local authority has called their ‘troubled families programme’ troubled families.”

Rasmussen described how a reluctance to reveal information about relationships because of the impact it would have on welfare benefits could deter some parents from seeking help.

Knowles said a better understanding of co-parenting might help with such situations, so that parents do not fear being honest. “We changed a lot of our language around co-parenting,” she added.

The language of parental conflict can also feed stigma over domestic abuse. Chapman said many schools are uncomfortable with getting involved because they “don’t feel it’s their place to have these conversations”.

But it might help to see the issue as a “spectrum of conflict”, added Chapman, so that interventions don’t seem like condemnation.

Hertfordshire worked with parents to develop its communications material, which included a leaflet pointing to a self-help tool.

Fennemore identified the need to land the “message that if there’s conflict in your relationship, that’s normal, but there’s something we can do about it”.

“What we’re really aiming for is to make children and young people’s lives better now”

Justin Tomlinson, family support minister

Other challenges

It is still early days, and local authorities are at different stages of committing funds and structuring their programmes.

There are concerns about momentum being lost. Some of the stumbling blocks were around how to resolve conflict situations.

Chapman said that even if parents are not together, they should be equally involved.

Burrell said the programme had helped Essex think “how mother-centric” its systems are, and had led to a “small test and learn” initiative, offering intensive one-to-one coaching for fathers “where dad is not engaged”.

The idea is to help them be the “best dad you can be” and just because conflict had occurred, it didn’t make him a bad parent.

“He might not be a great relationship person, but he probably wants to be a good dad. No parent wants to be a bad parent, do they?” added Burrell.

Bridie Collins, early help support manager at Westminster City Council, said that staff there had two years of training in parental conflict.

Even so, when it came to intervention, their instinct was sometimes to refer couples elsewhere for mediation, she explained.

Lysons also felt that training needs to build staff confidence, by “helping them understand what they can do” to improve lives.

Rasmussen said it sometimes took a long time to get intervention groups going, with some parents not able to commit.

Myers stressed the importance of testing interventions.

“Parenting programmes that don’t resolve conflict won’t produce results. I have a high degree of confidence that as the programme rolls out, the evidence will be strong. Intervening in this space will make children’s lives better.”