Inter-generational and whole-family approaches in supporting homeless and vulnerable people (London, 14 June 2012)

A thematic summary of key points and discussions from a seminar presented by Lemos&Crane working with Andrews Charitable Trust

The seminar presented key findings from the work of the ‘Tackling Homelessness across the Generations’ project in Bristol, and facilitated discussion on how similar work could be commissioned and developed in other parts of the country. The Bristol project funded by Andrews Charitable Trust (ACT) brought together 5 service providers (SPAN, Survive, Community Resolve, Shelter and Orbit) over 3 years to work collaboratively with Bristol City Council. The funded services included whole family key-workers (with specialism in homelessness and domestic violence), a group parenting programme, intra-family conflict mediation (using both adult and youth peer mediators), and a key worker to support fathers. The desired outcomes were increased stability of housing, improved outcomes for children and parents, increased community links, and improved partnership working between services.

This thematic summary should be read in conjunction with:
- Executive Summary of the Final Evaluation Report of ‘Tackling Homelessness Across the Generations in Bristol’ by Jo Howard
- Full report of ‘Tackling Homelessness Across the Generations in Bristol’
- Presentations from ‘Inter-generational and whole-family approaches in supporting homeless and vulnerable people’.

Social and policy context

- **What do we mean by family?** – new forms of families are constantly emerging as socio-cultural and political views and contexts change (the traditional notion of the ‘nuclear’ family - though still the most common type of family - should be seen alongside lone parent families, same-sex
parents, reconstituted families, separated, transnational, etc). Parents in these different groupings receive support from lots of different sources; they rarely bring up children entirely ‘on their own’. For example, support can be provided by friends as much as family members; the increasing importance of acquaintanceship in modern life is also relevant here – periodic contact with people who aren’t close friends and who you don’t see every day but who have general regard for your wellbeing and contribute to your sense of safety and belonging

- The family as arena for social policy and intervention – the notion of family has been privatised (consumption is at the heart of the identity of the modern family where parents ‘consume’ their children as a luxury good and children are defined by their possessions) with ultimate responsibility for its social conduct lying with parents; the possibility for ‘blaming and intervening’ follows from this premise and with it the validation for family intervention and support

- How families are supported – three tiers of family and parenting support can be identified at present: Intensive family intervention for families who are considered to have specific problems and needs (such as drug/alcohol problems, truancy, risk of crime, etc); universal services and programmes which are open access but structured and require regular participation; and advice provided ad hoc through websites and books for example.

**The Bristol project: the funder’s perspective**

- **Components** – ACT funded a portfolio of services that included key workers, a parenting course, and inter-generational mediation; the service providers met regularly as a partnership with representatives from Bristol City Council

- **Outputs** – partnership organisations worked with 401 families over the course of the 3-year project, providing intensive support to 150 families (at a cost of £2,155 per family) and group programmes to 251 families (at a cost of £1,115 per family) – this compares with the estimated cost of an average of £10,000 for Family Intervention Programmes

- **Outcomes** – Key outcomes for families (with measurement based on a ‘distance travelled’ methodology) included 73 per cent improving their housing stability; 61 per cent improving their community links; 72 per cent
feeling more confident in parenting; and 69 per cent of children / young people feeling more confident and / or attending school more regularly

- **Lessons learned** – need to spend more time in team-building and skill-sharing between agencies involved in partnerships; need to integrate parenting services (emotional support) with provision of services that meet practical needs (such as debt advice); need for stronger engagement with the statutory sector and agreement on outcomes at the start of the project

**The Bristol project: service providers’ perspectives and reflections**

- **Names and labels matter** – calling a group a ‘parenting support group’ rather than a ‘parenting programme’ is important in reducing stigma; there are significant problems associated with the label ‘troubled family’ that might prevent a family from wholeheartedly engaging with services
- **Giving voice to children** – children’s perspectives and opinions – not just those of parents - are important to take into account when working with families; they should be seen as co-creators or co-producers of services
- **The key-worker relationship** – the relationship between the keyworker and the family is crucial in creating a sense of attachment, which acts as the foundation for better relationships with others in the wider community; the keyworker is the broker / signposter for other services
- **Improving relationships and communications** – the ultimate purpose of parenting support is to improve communications and relationships not only between children and parents but also with the wider community including other external sources of support (improved communications can result in more productive and assertive interactions with debt advisers, housing officers, etc); in family mediation work, the best option might be a planned departure from home but one where good communication is maintained. Good family relationships can help young people to maintain a tenancy.
- **Information sharing** – this is a pressing challenge due to different ‘cultures’ of the statutory sector and voluntary organisations; the Common Assessment Framework in children’s services has been a useful reference point in this regard; one of the project participants, SPAN, has written protocols for working with social services
• **The formal role of smaller and specialist services** – Commissioning in the traditional sense requires formally constituted “consortia” to receive grants, but this requirement tends to work against the involvement of smaller or specialist services. How can organic partnerships be encouraged without a formal consortia structure? A future scenario might be where local authorities map services and assign tasks to them rather formally commissioning them through tendering as in the past

• **The need for fun and fulfilment** - homeless families facing crisis ‘go inward’ and so there is a need for service providers wherever possible to promote fun and enjoyment; it is also important for participants when they are out of crisis to feel that they can give something back (one of the participants from the project went on to become a volunteer at a food bank)

• **Most homeless families are ‘frequent movers’** – one of the families involved in the project had moved 37 times and their children had attended 18 different schools; this experience needs a fundamentally different approach than to homelessness prevention in the rough-sleeping sense

**Working with fathers**

• **The need for different or additional approaches** – fathers, especially young fathers, often feel out of the loop and beyond the scope of parenting services (when fathers hear ‘parent’ they think ‘mother’)

• **A crisis of identity for masculinity and fatherhood** – what is the role of a father other than to provide financial support (their only legal obligation)? There is a need to have conversations about the ‘purpose’ of fathers at an earlier stage, in schools for example

• **Peer support** – Parenting practitioners often suggest that fathers are not interested in groups, but Young Dads TV shows that, beyond intensive one-to-one support, fathers are interested in forming mutually-supportive groups that stay in touch with each other informally, by texting for example; many like to take on the role of educators and to help others with the benefit of their experience

• **Interest groups** – One of the most effective ways of creating sustainable groups that provide informal support is by basing them around common interests for fathers – for example, online gaming or football (this suggests
the need for a more sophisticated, ‘segmented’ approach to engaging with parents in general, not just fathers – the need to promote services based on a better understanding of parents’ motivation and aspirations; segmenting by age or gender is too blunt an approach.)

Towards sustainability

- **Health and wellbeing** – the outcomes achieved by the Bristol project would interest the new health and wellbeing boards that have over 90 outcomes to achieve including the prevention of mental health problems and the reduction of risky behaviours
- **Homelessness across the Generations** – research conducted by Heriott Watt University shows childhood trauma rather than poverty to be the most significant long term cause of homelessness (where extreme drinking leads to rough sleeping and to extreme homelessness). Out of 1,000 people interviewed for the research, 300 had experienced childhood trauma. The work of the Bristol project – by improving the family life of vulnerable children – clearly builds resilience and thus could contribute to the reduction of childhood trauma
- **The need for mediation outside crisis intervention** - Community Resolve’s experience is that mediation before (or after) crisis is much more effective. The benefits result in either planned departure or, if afterwards, can still provide the benefits of better relationships meaning young people are more likely to maintain their tenancy. Depaul UK also commented that it is trying to do this by taking referrals earlier on – from Connexions or YOT rather than just from Housing Options when the young person is presenting as homeless. Others at the seminar also talked about working in schools.
- **New approaches to local authority commissioning** – the changing commissioning landscape (the removal of the national ‘ring-fence’ around Supporting People services, the emergence of community-based budget pilots, health and wellbeing boards, etc) has seen many local authorities developing radically new approaches to commissioning, with more pooling of resources for commissioning and a greater focus on outcomes, often aimed at cutting across some of the existing silos (e.g. children’s and adult
services). The future is likely to have less tendering and greater deployment of a totality of resources to achieve area-wide outcomes

- In the London Borough of Islington, where 39 per cent of children live in workless households, the Supporting People team over the last four years has been commissioning support for families with an ongoing focus on the prevention of homelessness; families in temporary accommodation are given access to parenting support; there is a shift to joint, outcome based commissioning and aligned budgets; Islington estimates that the majority of families that fit within ‘Troubled Families’ criteria are already being supported through Family Intervention and Think Family services; two-thirds of these family/parenting services are delivered by the voluntary sector

- Swindon Borough Council is adopting a ‘whole system’ approach to commissioning, branded as ‘One Swindon’ with one set of outcomes defined across all services; it is also piloting community-based budgets; there has already been joint-commissioning between Supporting People and Children’s services; in relation to working with families, Swindon has engaged a wide range of partners (job centre plus, schools, children’s centres, police, fire service, etc) to meet the needs of vulnerable families building on the successful Life Programme; they are challenging leaders to get “comfortable being uncomfortable” to build trust and understanding between partners

The following action points from delegates indicate the extent to which this new approach to commissioning is influencing other local authorities:

- “I’m taking away opportunities for better collaboration with Adult and Children’s services to support vulnerable families. Creating a steering group in which work can be taken forward” Strategic Commissioning Manager, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- “Will review the current focus of SP – think about links with children’s services” Commissioning Officer, London Borough of Sutton
- “Has stimulated thought around future partnership working” Supporting People Team Manager, Surrey County Council
Useful websites

- Bristol project evaluation report - www.andrewscharitabletrust.org.uk
- Community Resolve - http://www.communityresolve.org.uk/
- Shelter - http://www.shelter.org.uk/
- SPAN - http://www.spanuk.org.uk/
- Survive - http://www.survivedv.org.uk/
- One Space for Single Parents - www.onespace.org.uk/home
- Young Dads TV - www.youngdads.tv/
- The Life Programme - www.alifewewant.com/display/HOME/Home

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