

Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper

In January 2010 The Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) released their new families Green Paper, eleven years after the release of *Supporting Families*.¹ Many of the policies first introduced in that paper are now cornerstones of Government policy. For instance, both Sure Start Centres and statutory maternity and paternity leave were introduced following the 1998 paper.

The new Green Paper *Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper* is a wide ranging piece of work that looks at supporting families with children in the early years, continuing this support through school, helping children and families with Sex and Relationship Education, family relationships and employment and the role of public services. The paper also announces a number of consultations.

Summary

Support for All is guided by the same principle as the Children's Plan: that families bring up children not Government.

The main policy direction throughout the paper is the focus on other family members, not just mothers. Most notable is the focus on fathers, including ensuring fathers also receive a free information pack at the birth of their child.

This focus on the wider family includes grandparents, older siblings and other people with a caring responsibility. For instance the Government aims to launch www.BeGrand.net to provide information for grandparents and significantly to remove the requirement for grandparents to obtain the leave of the court before making an application for a contact order.

The DCSF sees grandparents as particularly important for working class children who are more likely to be looked after by their grandparents than middle class children.

In addition to policies aimed at grandparents and other carers *Support for All* is keen to ensure that Government policy recognises a wide variety of family units: "families come in all shapes and sizes these days and the evidence is clear that stable and loving relationships between parents and with their children are vital for their progress and wellbeing".

Throughout the Green Paper there is a deliberate emphasis on a range of home support environments, which is in direct opposition to Conservative pronouncements on the advantages for children of living with married parents. Recent speeches from Ed Balls vigorously attacking the Conservative's marriage first policy suggest this area could become a key battleground in the election.

The Government's evidence for their focus comes from the *Families in Britain*² evidence paper, released in 2008.

Consistent with other DCSF releases the policies within *Support for All* are designed around the principle of progressive universalism. Ensuring that while there is access for all, services are targeted at

¹ DfES (1998) *Supporting Families: a Discussion Paper*

² Cabinet Office and DCSF (2008) *Families in Britain, an evidence paper*

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those who need them most. This approach has already been widely used in Sure Start centres. The Green Paper announces further support for parents with children in the early years along with increased and more flexible maternity and paternity leave.

Moving chronologically through a child's life the paper also contains policies to support families with school age children. Some of these, such as Parent and Pupil Guarantees, were announced in last year's Schools White Paper,³ however there are some new announcements.

To ensure every parent and pupil receives excellent support every secondary school pupil will have a named staff member who will support their learning and be the main point of contact for the family. To build on this the DCSF and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skill (BIS) will "investigate the nature of the links that currently exist between parents, schools, colleges and training providers and identify existing particularly effective approaches to engaging with parents and families that could be disseminated more widely".

Interestingly the paper also announced plans to ensure every local authority will be able to offer an intensive family intervention service for families with the most complex needs, as well as establishing a national training programme for family intervention workers. In 2010/11 the Government will explore the principle of involving parents in the training of staff who work with families.

This could be particularly vital for family services because it is enormously important that families feel confident and secure with the help available to them. The success of the Family Nurse Partnership⁴ in the UK has shown how vital well designed services can be. Improving training and the involvement of families in the design of these services can only help make them more effective.

Analysis

Support for All is an ambitious and wide ranging paper that attempts to build on the lessons learned in the past eleven years to create more effective families policy. The paper is very welcome both because it shows commitment and recognition of the importance of the family and that the results provide some excellent ideas, such as involving parents in training professionals working in family services.

However, the release of a Green Paper so close to an election means there is a strong chance the intended policies and even some of the announced consultations will be forgotten. With this in mind perhaps the most important aspect of the paper is the fact that it draws a clear and deliberate difference between the policies of the two main parties on the importance of marriage and models of family.

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³ DCSF (2009) *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future*

⁴ http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/family_nurse_partnership.aspx

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