

## **Evaluation of Rochdale Families Project**

### **Family Circumstances, Needs and Challenges**

#### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to provide information about the key issues affecting vulnerable families in Rochdale borough. Although these issues apply to families currently working with Rochdale Families Project and the case studies presented below are drawn from this sample, these issues are generic and reflect the research team's knowledge and experience from national studies in addition to the Rochdale research.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the complexity of the issues facing these families and therefore the challenges involved in providing support and attempting to improve the families' present circumstances and future life opportunities.

The paper does not seek to evaluate different intervention approaches but rather to provide the context within which support has to operate. A key message in the paper is that these families do require intensive and innovative mechanisms and there is a need to acknowledge the scale of the problems families face. However, although it is beyond the remit of the paper, it should be noted that initiatives such as the Rochdale Families Project are able to bring about forms of progress in these cases and there are a number of features of such projects which may be identified as central to progress where this has occurred.

#### **2. Key Issues**

All of the families have serious issues and protracted problems and, therefore, a complex set of needs. Each member of a family or household will have their own particular needs and it is often the social and emotional dynamics of the family that need to be addressed.

It is important to note that, although there are common features across the sample of families, there is also considerable variation. For example, in many households there is a very poor domestic environment and public and visible signs of problems, such as anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood. However, in other households there are no apparent problems with these issues, despite the fact that the families do have significant support

needs. In another example, for some households a key issue is a single parent attempting to cope with managing a household and several children. However, in other cases two adults are present in a household but this in turn generates a set of issues.

We have classified six key issues that are frequent features of the family households. Many families experience several or indeed all of these issues. The causal relationship between these issues is complex and varies in individual cases. However, it may be worth conceptualising the first three issues as causal factors rooted in family histories and personal experiences. The second set of issues are those presenting problems, often rooted in the background issues, which impact most visibly on the daily lives of the families.

### **a) Psychological and Mental Health Issues**

Family members are frequently on anti-depressants and have a range of mental health, self-esteem and self-confidence problems. It is crucial to understand that psychological problems are often rooted in parents' own very difficult childhoods. This is exacerbated by the daily stresses of parenting and attempting to cope in often very poor domestic environments and on very low incomes. This, in turn, can lead to detrimental impacts on the children's psychological wellbeing.

### **b) Bereavement**

It is striking how regularly and prominently bereavement is as an issue for the families. This can include recent bereavements (of a partner/child's parent, or sibling for example) but also includes adult members of the household being bereaved through the loss of their own parents. In some cases, adult members of the household experienced the loss of a parent or parents during their own childhoods.

### **c) Relationship Breakdown**

Many of the families have experienced relationship breakdowns. Most notably this involves adult partners or parents separating, but this also extends to adult members having difficult relationships with their extended families. Relationships between parents, partners and children are also regularly problematic. It is important to note that relations between individual adults and children vary greatly within households. In other words, adults often have simultaneous positive relations with some children and problematic relationships with other individual children in the same household. In some cases this issue is exacerbated by current partners not being the biological parents of all children in a household and the complex and often problematic involvement and interactions with children of parents no longer living in the home. It is important to note that domestic violence is a regular feature of many families, either currently or historically (or both).

#### **d) Parenting and Family Dynamics**

All of the families need support with parenting issues. These can include bonding and attachment difficulties at the emotional level through to the maintenance of consistency, routine and boundaries and knowledge around health, hygiene and diet. In addition, families need support with conflict resolution, ensuring that children play an age-appropriate role within the household and are supported in terms of education, peer friendships and access to appropriate leisure activities. It is important to note that adult members in a household often play very different parenting roles and one adult member may not be active or engaged in parenting strategies. In some households, gate keeping to the family home is an issue and individual members (adult and child) of the household may experience problematic and exploitative relationships with partners, extended family members, neighbours or peer groups.

#### **e) Education**

Many children have difficulties in accessing or sustaining education. In some cases this is due to unrecognised or unsupported learning disabilities or mental health issues. In other cases this may be due to poor attendance, difficulties with peer groups, problematic and disruptive behaviour at school or (for older children) the absence of an appropriate environment at home to engage in study. Adult members of the household may experience considerable difficulties in engaging appropriately or effectively with education services.

#### **f) Substance Misuse**

A number of households experience problems with substance misuse. This ranges from heroin addiction to heavy usage of prescription medicines and binge drinking. Patterns and forms of substance misuse often fluctuate considerably within a household over a period of time.

In addition to these issues, there are five further elements that commonly exacerbate the problems facing the families and add to the complexity of providing support.

#### **a) Assessment**

Families are referred to agencies and initiatives such as Family Intervention Projects when their troubles become 'public' and referrals are based on one or more presenting issue(s) (typically education, anti-social behaviour, crime or housing). However, a key lesson from these types of project is that visible problems or referral assessments only 'scratch the surface' of the underlying causal factors and complexity of family dynamics. One of the strengths of the key worker approach is an ability to assess a family, to witness dynamics in situ and gain an understanding of the actual issues that need to be addressed. However, this

usually results in the identification of the need to address very protracted and deep-rooted problems and the need to work with all members of a household. In many cases, project workers are able to identify very problematic circumstances or escalating difficulties and increasing risk factors. However, the ability of project workers to ensure that agencies address these issues is limited and agencies in turn face severe resource constraints that make going beyond statutory duties of care or 'bending' policies and procedures to the needs of individual families very difficult.

#### **b) The Interface with Agencies**

A common feature of the families is a difficult and at times hostile history of engagement with agencies. Families often feel that their needs have not been met or addressed. Conversely, agencies have often been unable to establish a relationship of trust or cooperation with the family. In some cases, this means that very serious problems or needs have not been tackled over a very long time period. Therefore, the work of projects, although often defined as 'early intervention' is in fact seeking to redress very sustained and intergenerational problems. Many (indeed most) families have a very limited understanding of the roles of the agencies working with them and the entitlements and limitations of support available to them. This issue is exacerbated when a large number of agencies are engaging with, or attempting to engage with, a family.

#### **c) Poverty**

In most (but not all) cases, families are on very low incomes or are in receipt of benefits. This means that they often lack the bare essentials required for family life (kitchen equipment, toys, access to leisure activities for children). This is exacerbated by a lack of financial management skills, vulnerability to illegitimate lenders and an inability to effectively engage with or respond to essential correspondence (for example relating to housing rents). This is a crucial context that magnifies the other issues impacting on families and greatly increases the daily stress of family life. Personalised budgets for project workers have been a very important mechanism for addressing (at least in part) this issue.

#### **d) Domestic Environment**

Linked to the issue of poverty, many families are living in very poor domestic environments. In some cases this means overcrowded accommodation. In other cases, the number of children creates significant domestic management tasks that can become overwhelming. It becomes more difficult to undertake repairs or to decorate rooms. This is then linked to domestic routines and parenting difficulties. These issues are exacerbated for single parent households or where an adult partner does not contribute to domestic management tasks.

### **e) Intensity and Social Worlds/ Influences**

Given the extent and complexity of the issues facing these families, it is evident that, in most cases, they require extensive and extended support. There is a perennial issue about the degree to which the amount of interactions that families have with workers, even when these are enhanced through intensive support projects, are sufficient. The ability to provide families with the skills and strategies to manage when direct support/intervention is not available or present is obviously central to the longer term sustainability of outcomes. However, it is crucial to recognise that interventions do not occur in a vacuum. Families are subject to a wide ranging and often rapidly changing range of influences (from peer groups, extended family, neighbours, absent partners etc.) and a project worker or other agencies are only one element of these influences. This means that family situations are fluid and may be subject to set back or crisis at any time.

## **3. Case Study Synopses**

This section provides brief contextual information about a sample of the families engaged with the Rochdale Families Project. These families have given permission to participate in the research. The details are necessarily brief in order to protect their confidentiality. It is important to note that these are the major issues or presenting problems and that each case involves the issues and complexities set out in the previous example. It is also important to recognise that the characteristics of this case study sample reflect the wider attributes of families engaged in intensive family support project nationally and will therefore be replicated in other families across Rochdale borough, not just Heywood.

### *Family A*

The household comprises mother and father with five children and an additional child placed by Social Services. One child has ADHT and another child is engaging in anti-social and criminal behaviour. The mother has anxiety problems. The home is overcrowded and there is a very poor domestic environment.

### *Family B*

The household comprises a mother and father and two children. The mother has attachment problems with a new born baby and has recently had a major operation. A range of agencies have been involved with the family.

### *Family C*

The household comprises a mother and son. The mother is on anti-depression medication. There is a poor domestic environment. There is a history of domestic violence. The son is excluded from school and has been involved in serious anti-social behaviour.

#### *Family D*

The household comprises a mother and her partner and two children. Both adults were heroin addicts and there had been a very poor domestic environment. There is also a history of very negative relations between the family and a range of agencies and service providers.

#### *Family E*

The household comprises a father and two children. The children's mother left the family home several years ago. There is a very poor domestic environment and problematic parenting. One of the children has assumed adult responsibilities for the household which are not appropriate given the child's age and has resulted in difficulties forming friendship with age peer groups at school.

#### *Family F*

The household comprises a mother and three teenage children. The family have been devastated by the sudden death of their father. There is a history of criminal activity in the family, including custodial sentences. One of the children has been involved in serious anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. There are also issues relating to differential bonding and relations between the mother and each of the children.

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