



House of Commons
Committee of Public Accounts

Troubled families: progress review

Thirty-third Report of Session 2016–17

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

Committee reports are published on the [Committee’s website](#) and in print by Order of the House.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr Stephen McGinness (Clerk), Dr Mark Ewbank (Second Clerk), George James (Senior Committee Assistant), Sue Alexander and Ruby Radley (Committee Assistants), and Tim Bowden (Media Officer).

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Summary

The Troubled Families programme was established in 2012 by the Department for Communities and Local Government (the Department) with the aim of “turning around” the lives of 120,000 families with multiple disadvantages. The Department considers a family to be “turned around” if it experiences a significant reduction in levels of truancy, anti-social behaviour, and youth offending, or if an adult in the family moves into continuous employment.

The Department informed us that the programme has impacted positively upon both the lives of troubled families and their associated cost to public services by, for example, reducing the number of times the police are called out. The Department had a target of “turning around” the lives of 117,910 families identified by local authorities as troubled. It made payments to local authorities for “turning around” the lives of 99% of these. An evaluation commissioned by the Department could not find evidence of whether or not there had been any significant impact. Additionally, publication of the Department’s evaluation of the Troubled Families programme was delayed for more than a year, and we consider this delay to be unacceptable. The Department was evasive when explaining the reasons for this delay, furthering the impression that government is reluctant to be open and transparent about the Troubled Families programme.

Introduction

In August 2011, following riots in some parts of England, the then Prime Minister announced a commitment to turn around the lives of the 120,000 most troubled families in England by 2015. The Government estimated that the annual cost of these families to the public sector was £9 billion, £8 billion of which was spent reacting to their problems instead of solving them. To meet the Prime Minister's commitment, the first phase of the Troubled Families programme was launched in April 2012. Initial central government funding of the programme was £448 million between 2012 and 2015. The Department funded local authorities for achieving outcomes with troubled families through a payment by results framework. While it did not prescribe how local authorities should work with troubled families, many adopted the perceived good practices of earlier family intervention projects, such as using key workers to join up public services. In June 2013, the Department committed a further £920 million to extend the programme to 2020.

The Department had commissioned a consortium to evaluate phase one of the programme. The evaluation aimed to assess the impact of the programme, its cost-effectiveness and how it was implemented. In August 2016, the BBC's Newsnight programme reported that the Department had 'suppressed' this evaluation, and that part of it had found that the programme had had 'no discernible impact'. The evaluation was published on 17 October 2016, two days before the Committee's evidence session.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Department for Communities and Local Government's delayed publication of the evaluation of the Troubled Families programme was unacceptable.** The Department for Communities and Local Government (the Department)'s evaluation of Troubled Families was originally due to be published in late 2015. However, the Department did not publish it until 17 October 2016, a year later. We requested the evaluation reports on 5 October 2016, but the Department did not provide them to us until they were published on 17 October, just two days before the evidence session. These delays and obfuscation have given a bad impression about the Department's willingness to be open. The Department informs us that it intends to report to Parliament annually on the progress of the Troubled Families programme, starting in March 2017.

Recommendation: *The Department should ensure that its reports to Parliament and the public on the progress of the Troubled Families programme contain the evidence necessary to conclude meaningfully on the programme's progress. Furthermore, to support effective parliamentary scrutiny, the Department must publish evaluations promptly and supply the Committee with timely information.*

2. **The Department's evaluation of the Troubled Families programme was unable to find consistent evidence that it had any significant impact at this stage.** Some strands of the Department's evaluation found evidence of good practice as a result of Troubled Families, such as enabling authorities to support more families and transforming the way they worked with these families. It also found significant evidence that the confidence and attitudes of families participating in the programme had improved. However, the impact evaluation could not directly attribute improvement in a range of outcomes related to employment, crime and health to the Troubled Families programme. The Department was unable to provide assurance at this stage that it would be able to evidence a statistically significant impact of the programme in the future. We are concerned that the Department commissioned the evaluation, and although it is challenging to measure success in the short term, the complex discussions and external reviews suggest that the original commissioning was less than perfect.

Recommendation: *The Department must develop a more meaningful longitudinal methodology for evaluating the impact and quality of the Troubled Families programme at both a national and local authority level. This should include an effective annual reporting system.*

3. **The payment by results framework led to some councils attempting to move families through the programme quickly, potentially at the expense of reduced quality of support.** According to the Department's evaluation of the Troubled Families programme, under the payment by results framework councils were incentivised to move families through the programme quickly in order to draw down payments without providing the support necessary to tackle deep rooted problems. In some cases, local authorities used national administrative datasets to identify families that had achieved positive outcomes and then retrospectively identified these families as 'troubled' and drew down reward payments.

Recommendation: *The Department should review its payment by results mechanism for Troubled Families to ensure that this is not resulting in local authorities diluting the quality of the support they provide to these families. The Department needs to track what ongoing support is provided to determine what works.*

4. **The terminology used by the Department overstated the success of the Troubled Families programme in transforming the lives of families.** The Department claimed that as many as 116,654 families had been “turned around” by the programme, which is 99% of the 117,910 originally identified by local authorities as eligible for participation in the programme. The implication of ‘turned around’ was misleading, as the term was only indicative of achieving short-term outcomes under the programme rather than representing long-term, sustainable change in families’ lives. While there was some success, by claiming that an outcome achieved meant that a family had been “turned around”, the Department’s use of the term overstated the impact of the Troubled Families programme. The use of this term suggested that long term social problems could be fixed within a few months or years, and risks undermining the entire concept of this work. The Department should not have used such misleading terminology.

Recommendation: *The Department should ensure that the terminology it uses to communicate the achievements of the Troubled Families programme gives an accurate depiction of how disadvantaged families make progress.*

5. **The Department has not demonstrated that the programme has provided genuine financial savings.** The Department announced that the programme had saved £1.2 billion. This is an overestimate as it does not take account of the costs of delivering the programme, although these included existing resources at local authority level as well as new money. The Department acknowledged that the £1.2 billion savings figure did not reflect the net savings directly attributable to the Troubled Families programme, and is currently seeking to work with local authorities to develop a better approximation of its financial benefits. Although these claimed net savings cannot be attributed to the programme directly, it also cannot be proven that the programme has had no financial impact.

Recommendation: *The Department needs to be able to make more accurate claims about any savings that can be attributed to the Troubled Families programme and, with local areas’ input, develop better ways of measuring whether the programme is achieving value for money.*

1 Impact of the programme

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Communities and Local Government (the Department) as the department responsible for delivery of the Troubled Families programme.¹
2. In 2011, following riots in some parts of England, the then Prime Minister announced a commitment to “turn around” the lives of 120,000 troubled families in England.² The Government defined troubled families as those with problems including youth offending, truancy, anti-social behaviour, and worklessness.³ The Government estimated that these families cost the Exchequer up to £9 billion per year, £8 billion of which was spent in reacting to their problems, rather than solving them.⁴
3. To meet the Prime Minister’s commitment to turn around families’ lives, in the autumn of 2011 the Government established the cross-departmental Troubled Families programme. The Department led the team responsible for the design and oversight of the programme, and responsibility for its implementation at the local level sat with 152 upper-tier local authorities.⁵ The Government set a budget of £448 million for phase one of the programme, which lasted from 2012 to 2015.⁶ This was paid to local authorities on the basis of a payment by results framework set by the Department.⁷ In June 2013, the Department announced that the programme would be extended until 2020 at a cost of £920 million.
4. The Committee of Public Accounts previously reported on the programme in April 2014.⁸ We recalled the Department to give further evidence, following media coverage which suggested that an evaluation was not able to attribute improvements in families’ lives directly to the programme.

Findings of the programme evaluation

5. In March 2013, the Department announced that it had commissioned a research consortium, led by the firm Ecorys, to conduct an evaluation of the Troubled Families programme. The evaluation consisted of six separate strands. Each of these strands was in turn part of either a process assessment of changes in the delivery of services to troubled families: an evaluation of the financial benefits of the programme or of a study assessing the overall national impact of participation in the programme.⁹ Within this consortium, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) was the partner responsible for the national impact study.¹⁰ The Department published reports

1 C&AG’s Memorandum for the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, [The Troubled Families programme: update](#), October 2016.

2 [Q 57](#)

3 [C&AG’s report](#), para 1.2

4 [C&AG’s report](#), para 1.3

5 [C&AG’s report](#), paras 1.4 & 1.12

6 [C&AG’s report](#), para 1.14

7 [C&AG’s report](#), para 1.15

8 Committee of Public Accounts, [Programmes to help families facing multiple challenges](#), HC 668, Fifty-first Report of Session 2013–14, 4 April 2014

9 [C&AG’s report](#), Figure 7

10 [Qq 6, 54–55](#)

detailing the findings of the different strands of the programme evaluation on 17 October 2016, as well as an overarching synthesis report summarising the key findings of each of the different strands of evaluation.¹¹

6. The findings of the Department's process evaluation were nuanced. It found evidence of good practice and widespread local service transformation, such as that the programme's funding had enabled local authorities to increase the support they could offer to families through means such as hiring employment advisers. However, the process evaluation also found a number of challenges that local authorities faced in working with troubled families, including variation in the level of support offered to them.¹²

7. The Department's cost benefit report estimated that the amount spent per family participating in the Troubled Families programme by various public services had fallen by £7,050 one year after the families started on the programme. It also estimated that, on average, it cost £3,350 to deliver the programme to a family. The Department stated that this implied a gross saving of £2.11 for every £1 spent on families participating in the programme. However, the cost benefit report also made it clear that these are gross figures, meaning that any savings cannot be attributed directly to the Troubled Families programme.¹³

8. The national impact study could not find evidence of a net impact when programme participants were compared against a matched comparator group for outcomes in the data that included crime, employment and health measures.¹⁴ The sole area in which the impact evaluation found a statistically significant improvement was subjective: it concluded that, as a result of participating in the programme, troubled families felt better about their lives and the direction they were taking.¹⁵ The findings of the national impact study were supported, in turn, by those of a complementary survey of troubled families, constructed by another partner in the ECORYS consortium.¹⁶

9. The Department told us that it was clear that the families in the programme had improved outcomes but that it was simply not possible to attribute these to the programme specifically.¹⁷ NIESR agreed with this assessment.¹⁸ The Department claimed that the findings of the impact study had many caveats as a result of poor quality data.¹⁹ However, NIESR maintained that there is no reason to believe that the findings of the impact study are biased in the statistical sense.²⁰ The Department told us that it was optimistic about making more progress in tackling issues with the data in the future.²¹

11 [Q 23](#)

12 Department for Communities and Local Government, [National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme: Process evaluation final report](#), October 2016.

13 Department for Communities and Local Government, [Local Authority Data on the Cost and Potential Fiscal Benefits of the Troubled Families Programme](#), October 2016.

14 National Institute for Economic and Social Research ([TFA0027](#)), para 9; Department for Communities and Local Government, [National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme: National Impact Study Report](#), October 2016.

15 [Qq 46, 120, 147](#)

16 Department for Communities and Local Government, [National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme: Final Synthesis Report](#), October 2016.

17 [Qq 45–48](#)

18 National Institute for Economic and Social Research ([TFA0027](#)), para 9

19 [Qq 36, 39–40, 44–45](#)

20 National Institute for Economic and Social Research ([TFA0027](#)), para 6

21 [Q 150](#)

10. The Department explained that this was an ambitious piece of statistical analysis that had not previously been attempted.²² Again, NIESR disagreed, refuting this and stating that such impact evaluations are not uncommon when assessing the effectiveness of government policies.²³ In addition, the Department suggested that it was too early in the programme life cycle for an evaluation to be carried out and that this was one of the reasons that the evaluators had to work with poor quality data.²⁴

Payments under the programme

11. The Department used a payment by results framework for the Troubled Families programme, under which it set out that local authorities would receive an attachment fee for assigning families to the programme and receive reward payments when the outcome criteria describing a family as “turned around” had been met.²⁵ Local authorities claimed reward payments for 116,654 families out of the maximum 117,910 for which they could claim.²⁶

12. We questioned whether the payment by results framework had caused the Department to take an approach that was focused on achieving short-term rather than long-term goals. The Department accepted our assertion that the payment by results framework measurements of a “turned around” family were all short term measures.²⁷ The Department told us that its commitment to wholesale system reform demonstrated that it was not merely focused on short term goals.²⁸

13. The process evaluation showed how the short term outcome measures set under the payment by results framework encouraged perverse behaviour by authorities in some cases. It found evidence that some local authorities attempted to move families through the programme quickly in order to draw down attachment payments. It also found evidence of some local authorities claiming results for families at the margins of the programme in order to meet targets. In such cases, according to this evaluation, this led to a divergence from optimal caseload sizes and case duration, meaning that families did not always receive the support they required to tackle deep rooted problems. Local authorities also made attempts to activate outcome payments by using national administrative datasets to retrospectively identify families that had achieved a positive outcome but had not been one of the families originally prescribed to the programme. These issues are unlikely to have been universal, however. The process evaluation also concluded that the financial framework had benefitted local authorities by encouraging them to improve their local data management systems as they became more outcomes focused.²⁹

22 [Q 130](#)

23 National Institute for Economic and Social Research ([TFA0027](#)), para 10

24 [Q 91](#)

25 [C&AG's report](#), paras 1.15–1.16

26 [C&AG's report](#) para 1.21

27 [Qq 111–115](#)

28 [Ibid](#)

29 Department for Communities and Local Government, [National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme: Process evaluation final report](#), October 2016.

2 The Department's presentation of the results

Publication of the programme evaluation

14. In August 2016, the BBC's Newsnight programme reported that it had obtained a copy of the national evaluation of the Troubled Families programme.³⁰ The BBC reported that this evaluation had concluded that the programme had "no discernible impact" on the lives of troubled families; claimed that there was a lack of transparency around the programme, and that the Department had suppressed the report since the autumn of the previous year due to these negative results. The National Audit Office had previously been informed by the Department that it planned to publish the national evaluation in late 2015.³¹

15. We wrote to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on 5 October 2016 to request a copy of the evaluation reports in advance of the evidence session which took place on 19 October 2016.³² The Department did not send the evaluation reports to us in advance of our evidence session, although they did publish all evaluation reports on their website on the evening of 17 October 2016, less than 48 hours before the evidence session.³³

16. We asked the Department for the reasons for the delay in the publication of the Troubled Families evaluation reports. The Department said the delay in finalising the report was due to concerns about the quality of data used in the evaluation. To remedy these issues, we were told that the Department commissioned an independent academic to quality assure the work, leading to delays in the report's publication.³⁴

17. The reasons for the delay in the publication were also a source of disagreement between the Department and The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). NIESR told us that it provided a full draft report of the national impact evaluation report to the Department on 28 July 2015, after which its findings did not change.³⁵ In addition, the head of NIESR'S impact evaluation, Jonathan Portes, claimed that a draft of the synthesis report was shared with the Department in October 2015.³⁶

18. The Department informed us that it had finalised the reports on 10 October 2016. We asked the Department why it was not possible for them to share the evaluation reports in draft format in advance of their publication. The Department told us that ministers decided to publish the reports on 17 October and as such, the Department focused its efforts in getting the reports into the public domain as quickly as possible. The Department

30 [Qq 1, 3, 6](#)

31 [C&AG's report](#), para 1.24

32 [Correspondence between Chair of Committee of Public Accounts and Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government](#) dated 5 October 2016.

33 [Qq 6, 23–35](#)

34 [Qq 4, 36](#)

35 National Institute for Economic and Social Research ([TFA0027](#)), para 1

36 Jonathan Portes ([TFA0028](#)), para 8

was evasive in addressing our queries about the delay in the publication of the evaluation reports, and did not address specifically our question regarding why the reports could not be shared with us earlier.³⁷

19. The Department stated that it will be publishing a report to Parliament on the progress of the Troubled Families programme on an annual basis. The first of these is set to be published before the end of March 2017.³⁸

Presentation of programme results

20. In June 2015, the Department published final data for each local authority on the number of families that they had worked with by December 2014 and the number of families “turned around” by May 2015. The published data indicated that 116,654 families had successfully met the outcomes criteria set by the Department out of 117,910 families that had been identified under the programme, representing a 99% success rate. The Department informed us that the fact that it made payments for 116,654 families under its results framework meant that these families had had their lives changed by the programme.³⁹

21. However, the Department also acknowledged that these payments were made for “snapshots” on how families were performing at a certain point in time in areas such as attendance at school. There is therefore no guarantee that the improvements the Department has paid local authorities for, and which it uses as the basis of claiming that families are “turned around,” can be sustained over time.⁴⁰

22. Additionally, in practice, the 99% success rate which the Department claimed did not include all of the families that local authorities worked with. The Department told us that they encouraged local authorities to work with more than the prescribed number of families, although did not pay them for it. The Department is not aware of how many families local authorities worked with in total.⁴¹

Financial benefits of the programme

23. In March 2015, the Department published *Benefits of the Troubled Families programme to the taxpayer*.⁴² The Department used the data in the report to claim that £1.2 billion had been saved through the programme. However, the Department had not accounted for the cost to local authorities of delivering the programme. It was also the case that these observed savings could have occurred for other reasons, such as the reduction in funding of public services, although equally, this cannot be proven.⁴³ The Department built upon this work in a cost benefit report that was published in October 2016 as part of the national evaluation of the Troubled Families programme, and later developed a cost savings calculator for use by local authorities to enable them to estimate the cost of delivering the programme. The Department also estimated gross savings of the programme based

37 [Qq 23–35](#)

38 [Qq 155–158](#)

39 [Q 104](#)

40 [Qq 111–113](#)

41 [Q 104](#)

42 Department for Communities and Local Government, [Benefits of the Troubled Families programme to the taxpayer](#), March 2015.

43 [Qq 107–108](#), and [C&AG’s report](#), para 1.32

upon the gross reduction in service use by each family one year after the intervention. The Department stressed, however, that as these were gross figures they could not be used to attribute financial benefits to the Troubled Families programme directly.⁴⁴

24. The Department explained that there are challenges to building the cost savings calculator as it can be difficult to convince other national agencies to share the data that they need, such as the number of police callouts.⁴⁵ We were told by the Department that it would work with local authorities to make further improvements to its cost savings calculator in order to develop a better approximation of fiscal benefits that can be attributed to the programme.⁴⁶

44 [Q 107](#); and Department for Communities and Local Government, [Local Authority Data on the Cost and Potential Fiscal Benefits of the Troubled Families Programme](#), October 2016.

45 [Qq 72–73](#)

46 [Qq 74–75](#)

Formal Minutes

Monday 12 December 2016

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon	Kwasi Kwarteng
Phil Boswell	Nigel Mills
Chris Evans	Karin Smyth
Kevin Foster	

Draft Report (*Troubled families: progress review*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 24 read and agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Thirty-third of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 11 January 2017 at 2.00pm]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 19 October 2016

Question number

Melanie Dawes CB, Permanent Secretary, **Dame Louise Casey CB**, Director General, Casey Review Team, and **Joe Tuke**, Director, Troubled Families and Public Service Reform, Department for Communities and Local Government

[Q1-158](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

TFA numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Brighton and Hove City Council ([TFA0020](#))
- 2 City University of London ([TFA0019](#))
- 3 Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council ([TFA0005](#))
- 4 Dorset County Council ([TFA0016](#))
- 5 Family Action ([TFA0021](#))
- 6 Greater Manchester Combined Authority ([TFA0018](#))
- 7 Hampshire County Council ([TFA0011](#))
- 8 Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([TFA0017](#))
- 9 Kirklees Council ([TFA0009](#))
- 10 LB Enfield ([TFA0012](#))
- 11 Local Government Association ([TFA0025](#))
- 12 London Councils ([TFA0024](#))
- 13 Mr Jonathan Portes ([TFA0028](#))
- 14 Mr Michael Lambert ([TFA0002](#))
- 15 Mr Stephen Crossley ([TFA0003](#))
- 16 National Audit Office ([TFA0026](#))
- 17 National Institute for Economic and Social Research ([TFA0027](#))
- 18 New Philanthropy Capital ([TFA0014](#))
- 19 Power to Change ([TFA0008](#))
- 20 Professor (Retired) David Gregg ([TFA0004](#))
- 21 Society of Local Authority Chief Executives ([TFA0007](#))
- 22 Tavistock Relationships ([TFA0023](#))
- 23 Youth Justice Board ([TFA0022](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current session

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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Second Report	Personal budgets in social care	HC 74 (Cm 9351)
Third Report	Training new teachers	HC 73 (Cm 9351)
Fourth Report	Entitlement to free early education and childcare	HC 224 (Cm 9351)
Fifth Report	Capital investment in science projects	HC 126 (Cm 9351)
Sixth Report	Cities and local growth	HC 296 (Cm 9351)
Seventh Report	Confiscations orders: progress review	HC 124 (Cm 9351)
Eighth Report	BBC critical projects	HC 75 (Cm 9351)
Ninth Report	Service Family Accommodation	HC 77 (Cm 9351)
Tenth Report	NHS specialised services	HC 387 (Cm 9351)
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Thirtieth Report	St Helena Airport	HC 767
Thirty-first Report	Child protection	HC 713
Thirty-second	Devolution in England: governance, financial accountability and following the taxpayer pound	HC 866
First Special Report	Protecting the Public's Money: First Annual Report from Chair of Committee of Public Accounts	HC 835