

UNITED KINGDOM NATIONAL POLICY BRIEF



The objective of this policy brief is to present the current situation and progress made in family support on behalf of the children's rights in the United Kingdom towards achieving quality standards using the quality assurance protocol for family support services developed by the 19 countries participating in the COST Innovators Grant IG18123, QA[4]EuroFam. The aim is to provide key messages on current strengths as well as recommendations to key audiences, bringing relevant views and appraisals from the group of interdisciplinary experts, representatives of various sectors in the field at national level.

National Working Group

Consensual responses were provided by members of the British National Working Group made up of 8 researchers and coordinators of services and social entities at national, regional and local levels in social, education, health, and community sectors.

1. Contextualization and characterization of family support in the UK



Q Definition and understanding of family support: Across UK policy and practice, family support can be defined and understood in narrow or broader terms. In child welfare legislation, family support can refer broadly to a process of practitioners and services working in partnership with families, parents and children to provide support and services to ensure families and parents can meet children's needs and support their welfare and development. In other areas, family support can refer to specific types of early help services or more specialist multi-agency and inter-professional services providing support for parents and families related to supporting those impacted by disabilities, health-related issues or educational support needs.

Q Family support services in context: Family support services can vary according to their primary aim and outcomes for the family (e.g. youth crime prevention, children's educational support needs or supporting improvements in parenting), the dominant professional or service orientation (e.g. social work, family welfare, education support or health orientated services; parent-focused or child-focused or whole family support) and the services provided. Family support can also refer to the range of practical, economic, social welfare and professional services provided to families in order to meet their support needs and to promote child welfare. Family support in some contexts can refer to 'whole family support', whereby services are provided on the basis of supporting parents and children in an integrated and holistic way.

Q Political perspective on family support: The dominant government political perspective since 2010 has been neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism whereby Conservative Party-led Coalition government and Conservative Party majority party government have pursued a policy agenda with an emphasis on investment in family support and early help measures that are targeted at high levels of need and 'profitable child-centred investment' alongside cutbacks and austerity measures reducing welfare benefits for families, financial support for families, and funding for some areas of family support and community services for children, youth, parents and families. A general election in summer 2024 may lead to a change of government and political perspective.

2. Key messages from the National Strengths and Recommendations Report



Families and Children

STRENGTHS

1. The UK context delivers a range of support measures for families with children which potentially enhance their well-being and protect family and child welfare. These include income support measures, in-work support measures, childcare support, and family support services.
2. Many advocacy and campaigning organizations offer practical, advisory, legal and advocacy support to enable children, youth, parents and families experiencing high levels of need and disadvantage to engage and benefit from the support and services available.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Parents and families would benefit from ensuring they are aware of their rights to support, and they access the information and support available from welfare rights agencies, Local Authority Family Information Services websites, and voluntary sector campaigning organisations – to claim and access their rights to support.
2. Parents and families would benefit from seeking the support of advocacy and support organisations to enable them to effectively engage with and benefit from support services.



Professionals

STRENGTHS

1. New models of working with parents and families with children in more collaborative, restorative and relational ways have become more embedded in child and family welfare services and practices.
2. Many localities are developing area-based service networks so that services are well coordinated and joint-up for children, parents and families. This enables local services to effectively meet the range of family support needs, and effectively work across agencies for the benefit of children and families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Professionals involved in commissioning and delivering family and parenting support services should continue to develop good practice in working in collaborative, partnership-based and co-production ways of working with families where decision making, support plans and services are delivered in partnership with parents and families.
2. Maintain and strengthen local service networks and partnerships to promote joint-up holistic support for children and families.



Policymakers

STRENGTHS

1. Major reviews into children's social care services and the role of family support and early help services in promoting child welfare have identified key challenges and called for renewed investment in, and reform of, early help and family support services.
2. There has been considerable investment in evidence-based practice centres and research initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policy makers and senior level service decision makers need to ensure the wide-ranging recommendations of major reviews into children's social care (and other areas such as child and youth mental health services, and education support services) are taken forward and major investment for service provision is provided.
2. Policy makers need to ensure there is sustained investment in research and evidence-based practice initiatives for family support and early help. Investment and strategic decision making in family support also needs to support more routine service evaluations and good practice developments, and professional workforce development and training.



Academics

STRENGTHS

1. There have been significant developments in incorporating the lived experiences of children, parents and families into research programmes and the coproduction of research.
2. There have been significant developments in multi-method and inter-disciplinary research projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Maintain and strengthen the role of lived experience representatives in setting research agendas and shaping research projects.
2. Continue to strengthen multi-method and inter-disciplinary research agendas.

3. Insights and lessons learned regarding the quality of family support



1 There are significant differences in governmental and policy agendas being pursued in relation to family support and early help across the four nations of the UK. For example, Scotland and Wales are taking forward current updated child poverty reduction strategies while England has adopted legislation which repealed the 2020 child poverty reduction targets and has no current national reduction strategy.

2 Across all four nations of the UK, frontline practitioners and innovative service leads are adopting more collaborative and strengths-based practice approaches to working with and supporting families and young people. Innovations include embedding parent/youth 'voice and influence groups' as part of service improvement strategies; and child and family welfare services adopting Family Group Conference/family-led decision making approaches.

3 In some areas, collaboration and coordination between services and sectors is well developed and embedded. This leads to more effective joint-up working across services and sectors, improving capacities for professionals to work together to meet a range of inter-connected needs in families and communities. However, austerity cutbacks, high demand for services, and poor inter-professional working in some areas inhibits these developments also.

4 Major developments in evidence-based programmes and practices have been achieved in several areas across services in the UK. Examples include Family Hubs developments, Sure Start and children's centres developments, early intervention programmes, parenting education programmes, couple and relationship conflict programmes, and public health prevention programmes. However funding can often be time-limited and short-term, and developments can be fragmented and difficult to upscale relative to needs.

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