



In the thick of it

A controversial scheme that tackles parental drug abuse by parachuting key workers into family homes is proving successful. But the flagship Labour policy is under threat from dwindling resources. **Sam Hart** reports

After a heavy night of drinking vodka and smoking spliffs, Jen finds it difficult to get the kids up for school. Left to their own devices, her two boys, aged 10 and 12, often spend much of the day with a group of older teenagers, some of who are suspected of drug dealing. Neighbours complain of anti-social behaviour and the youngest has already started smoking cannabis.

Police and education welfare officers have been involved with limited success and the family have now been referred to Brighton and Hove Council's Family Intervention Project – a 'tough love' approach which has been lauded as an effective way of dealing with the most chaotic families.

FIPs were launched in 2006 as part of a flagship Labour policy to tackle anti-social behaviour, prevent cycles of homelessness and help children achieve the *Every Child Matters* outcomes. Reducing the substance misuse of parents and children is a key focus of the programme.

Families are given eight hours of support a week and allocated a key worker to 'project manage' their problems. The workers co-ordinate support services and motivate families to change through a combination of support and sanctions. After an initial assessment, families and key workers draw up a 'contract', identifying realistic goals.

One of the first jobs of a key worker is to help families identify important relationships as sources of support. “For example there might be a family friend who was able come in and get the kids ready for school,” explains Ros McLean, a key worker from Brighton and Hove Council.

Recognition that family members do not operate in isolation is one of the key tenets of the project. “Problems are not individualised and no-one is on their own,” says Mat Thomas the FIP’s operational manager in Brighton. “And people don’t get to make excuses. It’s brilliant, but it’s also very obvious.”

Key workers are hands-on from the start, helping families establish routines, getting them to appointments and referring them to outside agencies such as substance misuse teams, parenting groups or education.

“I wouldn’t just make an appointment for somebody, I’d make sure someone was organised to look after the kids and I’d maybe pick them up and take them myself,” says McLean. “Families seem to really appreciate that kind of practical support.”

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Negative influences are also identified and in Jen’s case, her partner was found to be a significant obstacle on the family’s road to recovery. He was sporadically violent and refused to engage in any attempts to address his own substance misuse. This was severely affecting Jen’s ability to deal with her own problems and so she eventually asked him to leave. She also enrolled on a course of self-esteem classes whilst her boys were referred to young people’s drug services. Her substance misuse is decreasing and she has been referred to counselling.

Nationwide, FIPs have been largely successful and research published by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families in March this year found that there was a 70 per cent reduction in substance misuse among families who had completed a FIP by October 2009 and that families involved in anti-social behaviour had decreased from 89 per cent to 32 per cent.

Thomas believes that the tenacity of key workers is a crucial factor in the FIPs’ success: “The main reason the project is so good is because the key workers are very assertive in their work.”

“These are often families that services have been trying to engage with for years,” says McLean. “I’ve been round to a house 10-12 times, I’ve rung and I’ve texted if they are trying to avoid me.”

Research by the National Institute for Social Research (NISR) in 2008, suggests that families appreciate this kind of approach:

‘[FIP staff would] be there hammering on your door... and they’d come in, they’d say: ‘Right. Have you got the kids up? Are they washed? Have they brushed their teeth? Have they done their hair?’” said one family interviewed by NISR: “By the time they threw all that at you, you’re thinking to yourself, my God, what’s going on here, you know? But they pushed, they do push

you quite hard to get it done.”

But the project has not met with approval from all quarters. *Family Intervention Projects: A Classic Case of Policy-Based Evidence* – a report by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies earlier this year – stated that there was little hard evidence to support the reported success of the FIPs and that the wrong families are being targeted.

The report’s author, Professor David Gregg said: “At root, the FIP remains enforcement-led and sanctions-oriented, where someone must be blamed and punished for bad behaviour. This ethos justifies forcing very vulnerable families with mental health problems into projects under threat of eviction, loss of benefits and removal of children into care.”

The report also accused FIPs of failing to challenge the true sources of anti-social behaviour:

“The apparent balance of sanctions and ‘tough love’ support has wide appeal for politicians and the uninformed electorate. Unfortunately, in practice, FIPs fail in multiple ways: by targeting the wrong people for the wrong reasons; by targeting false ‘causes of ASB’ while failing to tackle the real underlying causes in those targeted.”

FIP advocates disagree, arguing that it is precisely their ability to get to the root causes that make them so successful.

“Because we are around so much, we can see why people might not be attending appointments, for example,” says McLean. “We can get more of a handle on the underlying issues.”

They also argue that their unique position at the heart of the family means they are able to notice issues that may go undetected by traditional workers.

“If you are a stand alone drug worker, you get to see the client once a week and not in their own home,” says McLean. “You are only getting what they tell you. Because we are around so much we get to notice things that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. For example, there was one young girl who was suffering horrific abuse at the hands of her brother who was a substance misuser. The girl was just getting her head down and doing well at school, so unless we had been working with the family as a whole, that girl’s problems may never have been highlighted.”

And the NISR research highlighted ways in which key workers can support drug and alcohol users come to terms with underlying causes of substance misuse: “One key worker said that after continually talking to a parent about the amount she was drinking, she finally admitted to having a drink problem. Key workers would then refer parents to a specialist support service in order that parents might address this issue. This resulted in parents reducing or stopping drinking and using drugs, and starting to deal with the causes of depression, such as facing up to issues from the past.”

But funding for the projects runs out in March next year and there has been no clear steer from the coalition government as to their future. The only nod to FIPs so far by the coalition government was contained in a leaked memo sent by Education Secretary Michael Gove to civil servants which called for a ban on 30 phrases he disliked. One of them was FIPs.

Ministers have pledged to ‘investigate a new approach to helping families with multiple problems,’ but despite their reported successes, the outlook for FIPs is uncertain.

Names of family members in this article have been changed.

■ **Sam Hart** is a freelance journalist