



From left to right: Nick Wilson, Anne Longfield, Simon White, Jim Graham, Hugh Disley, Trevor Doughty, Cheryl Coppel and Yvette Stanley

CHALLENGES OF 2012/13: THE DEBATE

Local government figures thrashed out the challenges for children's services in the financial year ahead at a debate organised by *CYP Now* and 4Children. *Ravi Chandiramani reports*

It was a strange quirk of fate. Just as Chancellor George Osborne was announcing the government's annual Budget on 21 March, council chief executives and directors of children's services (DCSs) sat down to discuss their challenges for the months at a *CYP Now* debate only a few miles from Westminster. And on that spring day, despite the narrowing financial constraints for local authorities, a sense of optimism emerged from the discussions. Four key topics dominated the debates: working with troubled families; health reforms; social investment; and the future role of local authorities.

TRoubLED FAMILIES

Prime Minister David Cameron has famously promised to turn around the lives of 120,000 "troubled families" within the lifetime of this government. Councils have now identified how many of these families reside within their boundaries. But there has so far been little support from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) about how areas should intervene – something about which councils were in fact relaxed, since it allows them to commission programmes they know best. Cornwall DCS Trevor Doughty said: "The central direction is probably overall a good one and we all have to concern ourselves with getting it and delivering results." Warwickshire head of early intervention Cheryl Coppel said: "The pragmatic has taken over. We see what is working in your area and

'troubled families' will fit into it." Disley's county is basing its efforts around a family intervention project inspired by its chief constable, which involves health services and police as partners. His colleague, Warwickshire chief executive Jim Graham, said his conversations with senior officials revealed that "civil servants have been caught on the hop by the political statements around troubled families and are desperately trying to play catch-up."

Participants agreed that turning around troubled families was a "hard sell" to councillors, given that the savings get reaped by other parts of the system. Since the debate, the DCLG last week released the financial framework for the programme; councils will be rewarded on their results in boosting school attendance, reducing antisocial behaviour and youth offending, and getting adults into work.

There was agreement around the table over the sentiment that "if you're really going to make a difference, it's the deeper you dig", and that the numbers targeted would be difficult to achieve. "When we're looking at our families, adult mental health, substance misuse and domestic violence are key issues," said Merton DCS Yvette Stanley. "The sort of interventions for those complexities are not quick; they are complicated and resource-intensive. I have 370 as my target – how many of those do I target and how many lower to prevent them coming up? I want to prevent people shuffling up that hierarchy of need."

Graham said Warwickshire is working with a fraction of its 805 identified families: "If we

have to work with all 805, we won't have anywhere near the impact we're having." He added: "If each cohort of troubled families is symptomatic of our collective failure over years to radically intervene and change people's lives, then the measure of success would be a diminishing set of newcomers to that categorisation." But he also cautioned: "I don't think you'll ever wipe out social fecklessness."

Surrey DCS Nick Wilson criticised the validity of the target numbers: "It's 1,054 in Surrey, but the data that generates that number is six years old, so that figure has no real currency."

But Havering chief executive Cheryl Coppel said: "The figures might be wrong, but the idea is right. If all the government does is hold us to account for certain groups in the population and then gets out of our faces about how to deliver, but holds the key partners responsible, then that allows local government and partners to do all sorts of innovative things."

Cornwall's Doughty argued that money earmarked for free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds would be better spent on the troubled families initiative. "These families have to jump through so many hoops to get their 15-hour entitlement with an approved provider... it's trying to solve the same purpose, but comes with all kinds of rules and guidance."

But Graham warned that transforming troubled families could still get mired in the process, citing the Leicestershire Total Place final report on joined-up services as "distressing reading" for the lessons it contains. "Administration procedures and processes ate up all the money."

"What was given to the public was a fraction of what they had. If we're not careful, that is what we will end up doing with troubled families – an over-expensive bureaucracy."

HEALTH REFORMS

Participants all welcomed the fact that local authorities will assume responsibility for public health in their area from primary care trusts, under the government's Health and Social Care Bill. "Because we have the resources and integrated teams, we're able to use the whole workforce to promote public health outcomes," argued Suffolk DCS Simon White. "Given the NHS has starved public health of resources for years, we're solving problems it has failed to solve for 20 years."

Cornwall's Doughty added: "In local government, we underestimate how much we've moved away from professional protectionism – health colleagues haven't." There was unanimity that local public health directors need a rounded outlook and will hold a tough job.

Havering's Coppel warned that children's services managers need urgently to engage with the new health and wellbeing boards in approving their local "strategic commissioning document" for local health services.

She said the document is "the only thing the health and wellbeing boards have to beat the clinical commissioning groups up with" and

hold them to account. Coppel warned that adult services should not be allowed to monopolise attention from the boards and that interventions for children and families must feature strongly in these strategic documents.

"I'm still driven by the need to tackle the sheer profligacy of the acute sector. That, for me, is the golden prize," said Warwickshire's Graham. "If we can get allowances from GPs, we can lever money out of the acute sector once and for all. It will enable primary care and public health to prosper."

SOCIAL INVESTMENT

There was scepticism about the potential of social investment to fund interventions with children and families. However, Havering has secured a social impact bond, supported by innovation body Nesta, for a programme of intensive therapy with 20 young people. "At the moment, the concept of social impact bonds scares people," said Coppel. "If you do little it'sy bitsy ones like we're doing, it's like learning to walk. If a few people set up the very simple ones for specific interventions targeted at very expensive people in the system, then confidence will grow." She called on the government to "galvanise some of the people who are interested in the market".

But Suffolk's White argued: "The financial arrangements are a bit of a distraction. Actually, if you have a compelling product, do that first and then think how you will finance it. We should put more energy into identifying compelling products. We know more about that and could learn from each other." Graham said the "inherent conservatism and risk-aversion" of local authority treasurers and accountants meant social investment was viewed as "newfangled, dead dodgy stuff." He added that social investment opportunities were not scattered evenly: "If you are in

London, there is a far greater set of opportunities for social entrepreneurial development afforded to you than if you are in other parts of the country."

FUTURE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

There was a general acceptance that the rapid expansion of academies was "killing off the concept of the local education authority". But councils are keen to retain a long-term role in delivering school improvement services, and are joining forces with neighbouring authorities to do so.

Stanley said Merton has such a partnership with five London boroughs, while Warwickshire is exploring such a tie-up with Coventry and Solihull councils since it has a memorandum of understanding to work together in place.

There were, however, concerns that children with special educational needs could get neglected in a system where schools increasingly become independent from local authority control.

But there was some support for councils doing less work directly with children and families. "This government is saying to us: 'what's the local government entity for – why do you need to exist?'" said Graham. "I'll be a heretic and say the early intervention work will only prosper if you take it outside local government altogether and give it to someone else. It doesn't matter who the delivery agents are at the end of the day, but we will still damn well commission it." ■

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