



Department for  
Communities and  
Local Government

# Listening to Troubled Families

A report by Louise Casey CB, Department for Communities  
and Local Government

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# Listening to Troubled Families

## *Foreword*

I wanted to get to know these families – I knew that they would have multiple problems, but what would this mean in reality? What kinds of problems do they face? How did they get to be so troubled?

What came from these families' stories were that they had entrenched, long-term cycles of suffering problems and causing problems. Their problems were cumulative and had gathered together over a long period of time – perhaps over generations. Listening to the families there was a strong sense of them having problems and causing problems for years. The longevity of their relationship with services was also striking. In many cases their problems began with their own parents and their parents' parents, in cycles of childhood abuse, violence and care which are then replayed in their own lives.

Family, and its influence past and present, was the pervading subject of conversation. The overwhelming themes that came out of the interviews were the complexity of these families' lives and the length of time the problems had gone on for – in many cases from generation to generation. None of the families I met had started experiencing problems recently. For many, problems had started way back, often when they were children themselves, and in some cases their troubled background was a repeat of their own parents' experience of growing up, including teenage pregnancy repeated by sons and daughters.

Problems were often very entrenched and each problem had given rise to or shown itself in other problems. For example, witnessing or being subject to violence in the home as children had led to problems at school, to children then going into care temporarily or on foster placement after placement, or relationship breakdown and new family set ups. Violence growing up often showed itself later in repeating patterns of violent relationships and violence towards children. Alcohol often fuelled violence – but alcohol or other drugs sometimes were cited as means of coping with violence.

There were a number of common problems that came through very strongly in talking to the families. When you layer these problems one on top of one another, across multiple family members, stretching back through generations, it is not surprising that the problems they present us with are so very challenging to get to grips with.

The most striking common theme that families described was the history of sexual and physical abuse, often going back generations; the involvement of the care system in the lives of both parents and their children, parents having children very young, those parents being involved in violent relationships, and the children going on to have behavioural problems, leading to exclusion from school, anti-social behaviour and crime.

In many cases each individual member of the household also had and/or caused problems. All the parents, most of the children and extended networks of family often have problems.

Families often seemed to stay close to former partners, members of their ex-partner's families or people that they have had problems with. These extended networks of family and friends appeared to be very powerful influencers and were often detrimental forces – for example, reinforcing non co-operation with agencies, or their sense of being victims themselves and so on.

Parents often don't connect their own problems and their own subsequent behaviour with then the problems and behaviour of their children. They have very low aspirations for themselves and their kids – for example attendance in a mainstream school every day.

Some families think that their problems are often because of just one child, when that is clearly not the case and that child is neither the only problem nor the starting point of where the problems in the family began. They see that their children often are 'problems' from a very early age. They often know that their children are causing problems in school and are not full-time attendees. Many parents said they themselves had been fine in school, but when probed it was clear they themselves had also been non-attenders or had behaviour problems in school. It was clear that the more difficult the child was the less time they were spending in any structured school or equivalent.

It seems as if problems with children and their behaviour often occur when adults in the house run into difficulty – even though services if brought in to help children will often deal with the behaviour of the child rather than the parental cause of that behaviour.

Many family members recounted episodes in care or experiences of child protection assessments or social care services, often as children and then with regard to their own children. The vast majority continued to have contact with the parents they were removed from whilst in care and afterwards as adults, and many of the girls begin having children as teenagers, often whilst still in care.

Many have large families and keep having children, often with different fathers, even if they are struggling to cope with the children they already have.

Violence appears in many cases to be endemic – not just domestic violence between parents but violence between siblings, between parent and child, outside the house and inside the house. Violence, verbal and physical abuse was described in an almost matter-of-fact way. Unexpectedly, arson was cited in a significant proportion of families, as either evidence of the children having problems or with regard to their homes being destroyed.

Families also explained that difficult episodes in life (that other families would be expected to eventually recover from and cope with) – such as a family bereavement – were a reason for the family being completely derailed.

Mental health problems exist across the families, but even when not specifically cited, often the mothers describe having given up, being exhausted and abdicating all control for what is happening in their lives, which in turn simply reinforces their problems.

Families themselves suggest that they need a 'wake up call' before they'll change and accept help – most families were facing action on child care proceedings, eviction or anti-social behaviour and were initially reluctant to take help. They often see themselves as victims, for example of anti-social behaviour, when it is also the case from what they say that their family is causing enormous trouble in their neighbourhood.

The interviews show that before working with the Family Intervention Project, the families have not been short of service interventions. Indeed when talking to these families occasionally it is striking how well-versed they are in the jargon of the services who have often been in and out of their lives for many years. Their stories tell the history of a generation of initiatives, programmes and goals – but it is true to say the families appear to have not been sufficiently touched by them to change.

This new programme of work with 120,000 troubled families is an opportunity to not repeat the failed attempts of the past, but to get underneath the skin of the families, and of the services that are now going to be working with them to find some lasting ways to make changes.

The interviews outline a huge range of problems. But they also show that families can and do change when they accept the right help – even for families who have inherited the worst and most entrenched problems.

What follows are fairly brief portraits of families that I spent a lot of time listening to, and that use their words wherever possible to paint a picture of the lives they've led. Their stories don't have neat beginnings or endings; their stories are often as complicated as the problems they face. No judgements are made on individual families; my purpose with this short report is to highlight the all-too-evident conglomeration of problems and issues and ingrained behaviours, that won't be shifted without intensive support and intervention from dedicated, assertive and persistent workers.

Louise Casey CB

Director General  
Troubled Families

## ***Introduction***

In December 2010 the Prime Minister set out that he wanted troubled families' lives to be turned around by the end of this Parliament.

The priority was to help families who were stuck with many problems, often responsible for causing problems, and also costing society a large amount of money in terms of the myriad of services that dealt with them without getting to the root causes; money spent simply containing families in dysfunction and hopelessness.

A team was established within Department of Communities and Local Government in November 2011 to drive forward as a cross-departmental programme to deliver this aim, headed by Louise Casey CB and under the direction of the Secretary of State. £448m has been identified across government to fund this programme, in partnership with all 152 upper-tier local councils who will work with families in their area over the next three years.

However, before the programme of delivery proceeded any further, it was thought important to listen directly to troubled families in order to get a true and recent understanding of the problems they faced, their histories and what the real challenge of 'turning around' thousands of other such families nationwide would entail.

Louise Casey, head of the programme, formally interviewed sixteen families (although she met and talked with many more), who were put in touch with her largely via Family Intervention Projects. Family Intervention Projects provide intensive, practical support to whole families. Each family is assigned a dedicated worker who assesses the family's needs, provides intensive one to one support until the most critical problems have been addressed and brings in and co-ordinates the support provided by other local agencies. They use a combination of support and sanction to motivate the family to change their behaviour. They use persistence and assertiveness with families to keep them engaged and following agreed steps. These are intensely practical projects; they teach parents basics such as how to parent children and set boundaries, establish routines, provide regular meals and maintain a clean and safe environment for their children. Families often agree to work with Family Intervention Projects when they are reaching crisis point – facing eviction from their property through anti-social behaviour perhaps, or their children being taken into care.

## ***The interviews***

The report draws upon interviews with families carried out in May and June 2012 by Louise Casey. Six local authorities in England assisted with providing access to families. Families were recruited on the basis that they had been working with Family Intervention Projects in those local authorities and were willing to discuss their experiences – no specific requests for types of

problems faced or backgrounds of a family were made. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the families attending. A total of sixteen families contributed their experiences to this report. Names of respondents have been altered to preserve their anonymity.

The families Louise interviewed are by definition already working with intensive family support services and are well on their way in many cases to turning their lives around. Their stories are recorded as case studies in this report, which does not go into detail the success the Family Intervention Project has with all these families, but looks more to explain how they came to crisis point of accepting the help of the Family Intervention Project.

Of course the case studies do not pretend to be an exact science – although the families were often shockingly candid and open during the interviews, the case studies still to a large extent outline their own portrayals of what happened to them and why they were in difficulties, and will perhaps not give a full or completely balanced account. For example, they may blame services for failing them, whereas we do not have the accounts of services to balance this.

It must also be noted that this is not formal research and that these interviews and the information they gave us is not representative of the 120,000 families that are deemed as 'troubled'; every family will have their own set of problems and complex histories, some may be less serious as those outlined in this report, and perhaps some more so. However this report we hope is a good starting place to inform our thinking and policy development – to understand how we may best go about helping change the families for good.

Although some conclusions may be drawn from reading the families' accounts about how services may work best with the family as a whole, and some conclusions drawn about how services have historically failed to grip the problems of families, this report does not seek to make wholesale conclusions about services. This may be something that we return to, but for now the concentration must be on what these families themselves can tell us about their lives, their problems and what they may have in common with each other.

## Case studies

### Angela and Carl

Angela and Carl are a married couple with five sons aged between 4 and 20. There was conflict between the parents at home and Angela believed there was something medically wrong with her middle son, who was causing a lot of trouble. She believes that professionals would not listen to her and that the late diagnosis of ADHD has led to the problems the family has.

*"I think Carl got made redundant, I packed in work. You got a bit of depression as well and whatever. Obviously when he was working days and I was at home he'd come home and I'd be nagging, 'The boys have done this, the boys have done that.' And it would be, 'I've been at work,' as you do you argue. Noticed Sam, I would say from about 4 or 5, something not right with him. We had the other two, going through school no problems whatsoever...I made an appointment and I said, 'Can you just check him out for something,' and she says, 'What do you mean?' and I goes, 'Well, I'm getting this at school, he's done this, he's thrown berries at parents, kicking the walls in, all different things...Set fires at school. Thrown tissue out the window. The handy man...one instance he had to plaster all the wall in the boys' toilets and my son knocked it all back down. Flooded the toilets, put tissue paper in the sinks.' Still they kept saying there was nothing wrong with him. So obviously I went to the doctors, 'Oh he's fine...typical boy.'"*

Angela had not realised that Sam was attending a special class at school because he wasn't coping with school work. She continued to press for someone to find out the root cause of Sam's problems. She asked for help from social services but did not get it – *"nobody was listening."* The eventual diagnosis of ADHD for Sam was a relief. But then Sam refused to take his medication.

*"There's a class called Sky Rockets and me perhaps being a bit divvy thought it was for good children who're really quite brainy. But I did not know it's for naughty children. So for about a year I'm going round saying, 'Oh he's doing really well, he's in Sky Rockets.' I was so chuffed...your head's just all over the place. So he was in there and they said because he can't cope with big classes... He would sit there rocking on his chair, making funny noises, throwing pencils, rubbers at other children."*

*"Obviously we're going to school, 'Oh he's thrown berries at parents, we'll have to exclude him.' Cooling off period. Cooling off period for you, yes, but not for us. He'd smash our doors, kick the things. . So they'd get me in continually for different meetings, this that and the other. And I thought, 'I've had enough, I'm exhausted.'"*

*"I phoned social services... From a young age. I said, 'I need some help,' explained the situation what he's done at school, burning this, burning fires, smashing my house up, basically they said they couldn't help me. They"*

*asked a couple of questions, 'Oh I think they're fine, he's okay, he's with his parents.' I turned round in a temper because I was crying my eyes out, 'I need some help, how do you know,' mind my language, 'I haven't fucking killed my kids and they're fucking dug under my patio, I'm asking you for help.' No help. Do you know what? They didn't even come out to check the family, didn't even come ... me, myself I wouldn't say I would kill my kids, but I'd got that angry I just didn't know what to do...*

*"To me I think it stinks, the system stinks. They've let me down. The school let me down, the doctor let me down. He kept saying there was nothing wrong with him."*

They did not realise that their eldest boy who was studying law at college was also having problems:

*"I was outside putting my washing out. And he goes, 'I think I've got something to tell you, mum.' I said, 'What?' He goes, 'I haven't been to college for the last three months.' I said, 'Why?' 'I'm not coping.' And I didn't know he'd got diagnosed with depression himself. Because of all the things happening with Sam. I felt like I wanted to cry. I said, 'Why didn't you come to me? I'm your mum, I'm not that bad.' He said, 'It's because Sam is taking all your time up I didn't think it was fair for me to add onto you even more.' And what he'd been doing was getting up every day, going out the house as if he was going to college for three months..."*

Their second son was also not in education or working and was isolated, spending long periods alone in his bedroom. Their home was in disrepair and the ceiling had fallen in. Sam was associating with a gang and had been arrested by the police.

*"Sam got mixed up with a gang last year as well... He doesn't see the danger, and with ADHD they don't. He was caught on the Co-op roof because they'll say do it and he'd say, 'How high?'...I went into the local pub, I went around giving out my phone number, all my phone numbers, the Co-op, all the shops, you see him, please ring me. [Police] Beat managers – got their numbers. And I said, 'If you see my son around here,' I actually asked them to put an ABC [Acceptable Behaviour Contract] in place... I was called the grass, the snake, this that and the other, yes, because I'd done it. I'd phone Beat managers, 'He's down the area, if you see my son, can you arrest him and bring him home?'...He's no angel, don't get me wrong, he's got a mind of his own but..."*

Sam was eventually diagnosed with ADHD but she says the doctor didn't explain what that actually meant – but that a course on ADHD management was helpful once the Family Intervention Project was involved. Another son is now showing signs of the same problems:

*"...they've said the same thing, for the first three or four months, phone call after phone call, 'He's doing this, he's doing this.' Bearing in mind he was three when he started, and the same again, the stigma starts again. He's*

*doing this, wrapping himself around the curtain, he's hitting children. He's showing the signs of ADHD, you know what they've all said again? He's copying his older brother."*

## Belinda

Belinda is 31 and has five children, Shannon 14, Patrick 13, Marcus 11, Aiden 3 and Ruby 1, by three fathers. She has also had four terminations and two miscarriages. Belinda has experienced domestic violence, rape and mental health problems. She remembers an unhappy childhood:

*"I didn't really get to see my dad much because he was working all the hours God sends but [my parents] were very violent as well. Not towards us, themselves. They were always fighting and I just didn't really have much of a childhood life. Don't get me wrong, we had everything, we had everything in our rooms, we had all the best stuff but there wasn't actually a family life as such.*

Her extended family is one where having a lot of children is the norm: *"...you've got like my cousin who has got six kids, my sister has got kids. One of my cousins has actually got eight kids so it is a big family."*

She had her first child, Shannon, at 17 with a man of 32; they went on to have a second child, Patrick, together. He was violent towards Belinda and had an affair with her sister, eventually going on to marry her sister and have five other children with her.

*"He beat me up for a while. In the end I was three months pregnant with Patrick and I'd had enough and I ended it and then I couldn't properly get on with my life up north. It was in 2003 I actually got raped [by one of the ex-partner's friends]."*

*"So when I went to court in 2004, it was what, six or seven months after it happened. I can remember what happened but once I started seeing the photographs of the bruises and cuts and that on my body, I started to remember stuff but it wasn't all clear so I got mixed up so he walked free."*

She wanted a fresh start so moved down south near her father. Her next relationship resulted in a traumatic miscarriage and relationship breakdown, and the two children went to live with their dad, but have since returned.

*"That was because I was in a relationship with somebody. I got pregnant – I ended up miscarrying one of the twins. And then the relationship broke down because I couldn't deal with the miscarriage." The other twin was aborted.*

*"...I came to stay with my dad and my mother was there as well. They are divorced now. She actually kicked me out of the house with Shannon and Patrick at three o'clock in the morning. She was a bit of a drinker. And so my dad took me to the train station. I took Shannon and Patrick on the first train to Eastgate, left them with their dad and I did promise them once I get back on my feet and get my advice, I'll get them back home with me."*

Belinda went on to have her third child, Marcus with another partner. *"Marcus' dad was from 2000. We were only together a couple of months. I'm very*

*fertile...He [Marcus] actually went to live with his dad due to Patrick having severe ADHD. When he was 5 he was diagnosed and I couldn't handle all three children. I had Patrick smashing stuff in the house and I had Marcus smashing windows with rocks because he was copycatting Patrick's behaviour so I asked his dad to look after Marcus...he hit with me a custody battle which I lost."*

She recalls the court case as a 'nightmare' experience and no longer has any contact with Marcus. *"He's 11 now and I'm not going to mess up his life. I've got four other children to think about. Once he's older, he knows who I am, if he wants to come and find me then he can... It sounds heartless but I can't do it anymore."*

Belinda has been in a psychiatric unit for post-natal depression and has attempted suicide. She was raped a second time but neither court case resulted in a conviction. *"I didn't deal with my past properly. The rape in 2003, I didn't deal with it...I was told by a psychiatrist that if something happens to you so bad it messes with your head. I tried to commit suicide in 2006. That's another issue. 2009 I was actually raped again by, at the time it was my boyfriend's uncle so I couldn't deal with it..."*

Social services have been involved with Belinda and her children for several years. Belinda's partner Ian is the father of the two youngest children Aiden and Ruby. He is in contact daily but doesn't live with them as he finds the household too noisy and chaotic. He is an ex-soldier who has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and there has been a history of violence in the relationship.

*"And basically me and Ian, we fell out and it was all to do with an ex-girlfriend of his. It got to social services that I was an alcoholic and I was a drug addict. I don't do drugs, I've never done drugs. I do drink but barely. I have a glass of wine now and again but there was one point when I was pregnant with Aiden I did get drunk because Ian brought his ex-girlfriend home to his house which I went mental over...also got into a physical fight between me and his ex-girlfriend and I had to prove to social services that I didn't drink or do drugs so once child protection was brought in I think I was seven months pregnant with Aiden at the time. I had him and I had to be in a mother and baby unit for six weeks to prove...I didn't do drink or drugs or anything like that. Even though that was proven, because you do an on the spot urine sample, social services still had it in their head I still had a problem and I didn't."*

*"All the kids were on the high risk register...for emotional abuse. I first went down for physical abuse.I had social services for three years. The arguments with Ian and I...One time I was holding Aiden...when he was born...he suffered from apnoea so he was attached to a monitor so when he stopped breathing his monitor would go off. And Ian and I got into a bit of an argument and...there was concern about Aiden in case he got hurt. Then there was Patrick with his emotional issues with ADHD so they questioned him. And also I've got history of being in a psychiatric unit."*

*“We won't argue in front of the kids because as I've said to Ian...I don't want them growing up with what I used to have to deal with when I was a kid and they've been through enough as it is...”*

## Bethany

Bethany is 28 and a single mum with two children. Bethany's mum was abandoned by her own mum as a young child and went on to have her first child, Bethany's older sister, when she was 16.

*"My mum hates kids. She hated every single one of us. You know, she could not wait until we got out of that house. She hated it. She don't like being an adult... Like I really haven't had a mum, she didn't have one....I sometimes think I'd have been better off if my mum had gone...because I've had a mum there and she's taught me so many bad things."*

Bethany's mum drank a lot throughout Bethany's childhood and had abusive relationships. *"They all used to try it, all of her boyfriends fought with her, but she's a nasty cow...I'm not sticking up for him because I cannot stand him...but he'd sit there watching Coronation Street and my mum would just start scratching his eyes out...that's why people have hit her."*

Bethany started getting in to trouble after starting secondary school. Her mum had another new boyfriend whom Bethany did not get on with and she used to run away from home for a couple of weeks at a time. She smoked a lot of cannabis from the age of 12 and went on to use other drugs. She barely attended school after that. She spent time in foster care from age 13 and stayed between friends and her sister's place over the next few years, moving in with her first boyfriend when she was 16.

*"Yes, I had a social worker. Because I used to smoke a lot of weed and I think that's why I can't remember or I've blocked it out or whatever, but I vaguely remember going down to social services where I lived. I remember sitting there with my mum and my dad and they were talking and then I never saw them again. That were it, never saw them again ever, until my trouble started, well troubles with my kids, sort of thing."*

She started going out with Phil two years later. *"When I met my kid's dad I was just taking... like uppers a lot of time because I used to be a raver...And then when I met him he were an ex-heroin addict but he had an implant in, so he weren't doing any drugs when I met him."*

Bethany and Phil had Josh when she was 22. Throughout the pregnancy she smoked cannabis. Bethany suffered from post-natal depression and didn't really care for her son properly for a long time after his birth. She became addicted to heroin and methadone.

*So anyway, he weren't taking drugs then and then like when it ran out he started taking, using, heroin. So I used to have like a cap full of methadone...I used to take some of that just to be on, like, the same sort of wavelength of him...And then one day...I remember saying to him 'I don't want to do it anymore I feel sick, I don't like it, I don't want to carry on doing it'. I remember lying there, all day...and he looked at me and he just went 'you're going to tell*

*me to go and get it aren't you?' and I said 'yes, I can't go for the rest of the day without it', and that were it then, I were addicted."*

Phil used to leave the house for days on end, locking Bethany inside alone with baby Josh. On one occasion when he returned, Bethany stabbed Phil *"...all I'd ever seen was my mum and her boyfriends fighting, I thought to myself there's no way on earth I'm going to have a bloke kicking me about the house. So I just started hitting him...as soon as an argument erupted I'd ram something at him and stuff...you know run out the house, anything to stop him from hurting me like my mum used to get hurt. Yes, and then I think he'd had enough, which rightly so I don't blame him for...we just used to fight...we had so many police things at our house that they were going to give us both an ASBO thing...because it were that bad, it were really bad, but it were both of us."*

After the stabbing there was a court case and then social services were involved. Phil, whose sister had been killed through domestic violence, moved to another flat in the same block after the stabbing. They continued to see each other though and Bethany became pregnant with Poppy.

*"He was saying [to the police] that he was petrified of me, he was scared to walk down the street, and yet he moved in next door to me and he kept, he was with me all the time, because I said to him you'd best not come down now because I've just stabbed you, I think we should have some time apart..."*

*"I got pregnant with my second one...and to be honest with you, she made me a mother. When I was pregnant with Josh I was still drinking, smoking, jumping on bins, I was a big kid. Phil didn't...accept the baby, so I didn't, and I didn't acknowledge it in my head, I was getting fatter but...it never entered my head that I was going to have a baby...I honestly thought it were going to go away...And then somehow I got pregnant with Poppy. But I went three times to get rid of her...They wouldn't do it because I were at thirteen weeks and two days...Anyway I grew to love her."*

Bethany reduced her methadone intake during the pregnancy. She says she cannot explain why she started taking heroin again when Poppy was a baby. Both children were put on Child Protection Plans. Friends, other heroin users, would often drop round to the flat to use drugs. Bethany described how she dealt with social services, *"...I used to blag people...tell everyone what they wanted to hear and then they'd go and I'd carry on doing my stuff...my gear..."*

After her behaviour at one child protection meeting when she was high on drugs, social services were so concerned that they gave Bethany five days to improve and start working with the Family Intervention Project or face a legal process to start removing the children. *"I knew that my time were up now, this were it, and my kids mean the world to me, even though I've put them through a lot of shit that I know is going to affect them for the rest of [their] life..."*

Bethany is working with the Family Intervention Project and again reducing her methadone, and learning how to be a better parent. *"I wanted a baby from*

*the age of 13. I'm so so glad that I didn't have one, and I wanted one for all the wrong reasons. I still, I do now, now that I've moved into my house and stuff, but a few years ago when I hit rock bottom, I still didn't feel ready to be a parent, even though I had two kids.*

*"It isn't until now that I've been getting help myself and grown up and like I'm a proper mum now, do you know what I mean, and I'm learning off my mother in law what a mum's supposed to be like and what an adult and a woman is supposed to be like. I actually look at my [own] mum and I think you're acting like a kid."*

## Chris

Chris has nine children and another son on the way with his wife Julie. Chris and Julie became a couple when Julie was 14 and Chris was 18 or 19. Their first was born when Julie was 17.

*“Basically because I had two girls at first and then I got my boy, I wanted to try to get another boy and I’ve got so many girls.”*

Chris suffered a brain injury as a child as a result of a road traffic accident. He has learning difficulties and ADHD and went to a special school. Julie also has learning difficulties.

Chris and Julie feel that they are able to cope reasonably well with babies and toddlers but not when their children become older, when their children start asserting themselves and dominating their parents – which has led to some of the children being removed from Chris and Julie’s care. Being unable to control the children as adolescents also meant that neighbours complained of anti-social behaviour from the family.

*“They [social services] came back into our lives as we were getting older, I mean like as we were having more children basically, because there were so many running around we couldn’t cope ...so you’d have those ones running around plus having these and these coming along. Yes, it was all too much at the time basically...”*

Chris also says that he feels that his parents didn’t know how to be a parent either, *“...probably because they weren’t brought up like it I suppose.”*

Damien, who still lives with Chris and Julie, is 17 but has a learning age of 7. He was involved in a burglary and has had a curfew imposed by the court.

The next two daughters live with their grandma, Julie’s mum, who has guardianship of them. Julie and Chris see them.

*“When Madison and Natalie were living with Nan it was alright at first, then when Nan was trying to put boundaries in place Madison was like ‘I’m not doing that! You do it!’ Then it was causing friction so Madison decided to put herself in care...Nan won’t take her back, the care home won’t take her back so basically she’s here, there and everywhere.”*

Social services have said they want Madison to return to the family home but Chris is reluctant: *“The way I look at it is now I’ve got a newborn baby on the way, so what happened previously I don’t want it to happen again, because they want to take my baby at birth...and if I let Madison come home they’d be saying well look you can’t be worried about the baby, you’re just worried about Madison and whatever she’s doing...”*

The next four daughters (aged 11, 10, 7 and 4) were taken into care. The youngest went a few days after birth and has now been adopted. The other

three went into care as young children. They have been in different care placements for four years and are waiting to be adopted together.

Chris has only worked occasionally and Julie not at all. *“I worked from the age of ...sixteen...They had a big warehouse and I was working there...I came out of there and worked in a builder’s yard...Then basically I left that when I was 19 or 20, because I got married then.”*

The family had seven different social care teams involved in their life – a different one for each child except for Damien, including their unborn son. Chris says he did not cope well with all the agencies involved.

*“I’m normally one of...like case conference...I’m normally one of those people, quick tempered, I will get up and shout – everything...Basically I’d lose it, I’d lose it. I’ll be honest with you, I’d lose it. I’d be like shouting at the top of my voice so people – basically the whole building would hear me. I’d be like that, and I’d get up, go out the room, sit down for ten minutes and come back in. I used to be like that.”*

The Council’s housing department referred the family to the Family Intervention Project when the family were on the verge of eviction. They had already been evicted from a private let in the area and were re-housed in another part of the town before they moved back to the area.

*“No-one helped me at all...no-one even put me on a parenting course or anything. I mean I’ve been on one now, I’ve achieved the certificate and everything, so has my missus and that was from [the Family Intervention Project] helping us. I mean...no-one even came in and said this is – you are doing this wrong or you are doing that right, don’t do it like this, do it like that – no-one.”*

Of their children, the oldest two daughters aged 19 and 21 both have babies of their own and one is pregnant again. At the time of interview no final decision had been made about whether Julie and Chris’s unborn baby would be taken into care at birth.

## Donna and Jake

Donna and Jake have five children aged 18, 16, 13, 8 and 1. Their first was born when Donna was 19 and the second followed within two years.

Donna was placed in care from 5 to 18 years old. She remembers that her mother stayed in bed all day, would beat her with a belt and lock her in a room without food and water. Her father would come home from work and unbolt the door and change her soiled sheets. Her eldest brother would try to get food to her. She was the eldest child, with three younger brothers, but it was only Donna who was abused by her mother. She was put into care first, followed by the eldest brother, and the two youngest were adopted.

*"In my file it says she didn't want me from birth. The school noticed the neglect. I remember being in hospital one time and people taking photos of me. They might have prosecuted her I don't know. I went to a foster family started acting up, moved...moved lots of times. Then one family the brother and father sexually abused me for two years...think some of my behaviour was down to this. My proper dad noticed something was wrong."*

Donna met Jake in college where she went to retake her maths and English and then she went on a youth training scheme, she moved in with him, forgot to take her contraceptive pills with her and got pregnant. Social services monitored her for a year after the baby was born to see if she could be a suitable parent. They left the baby with her – however the children have subsequently been subject to child protection plans, which can mean that they are at risk of being taken into care.

Donna says that she can't be strict with her children because of what happened to her as a child, and that Jake was not a real parent as he was a long term drug user, smoking cannabis every evening after working in a supermarket as a cleaner. He had been smoking for sixteen years, since the death of his father.

*"It was just me as a parent for sixteen years as he's been on cannabis...trying to find money, making sure they had food. He spent about £70 a week on cannabis."*

They had no help from extended family. *"The night [Jake's] mum had our Daniel when he was nine weeks old, the very next morning she rang me up, she said, "You are going to have come and get him, I can't have him again." He was only nine weeks old, her first grandson as well."*

Donna says that the children started having problems and getting excluded when they reached secondary school.

*"Graham (the eldest), in junior school he used to act up, he used to be rocking on chairs, going backwards and forwards. He'd throw pencils, a few occasions I had to go in the school and sit with him in the class and say, "Right, Graham, knuckle down, get your work done." But then the teacher*

*said they'd asked three times for him to go in for a dyslexia test, nothing...then he's got himself into two fights while he's been there. He got kicked out once for fighting. Then he started smoking [drugs], which we didn't even know. He was about 13 when he actually told us."*

The family were in debt and had rent arrears. They were at risk of eviction as a result of the children's anti-social behaviour and the criminal proceedings against their eldest son. The two older boys had burgled a house on their estate – an empty house that they ripped apart and flooded. The eldest was hanging around with friends already involved in crime. The younger boys were also perpetrating anti-social behaviour on the estate, and the police were called out. Jake said he'd been unaware of the criminal and anti-social behaviour of his older sons.

*"You know what it was? They used to terrorise the neighbours...and when the council sent us a letter asking us to go in we didn't even know what our kids had been up to. We just thought they were normal children and every time we came in we used to ask them what they'd been up to.*

*"Apart from that you get branded when you go out on the streets. People look at you when you go shopping, can't you keep your kids under control? Yes, I've been asked to leave a store with my kids. It's ridiculous because I need to go and do some shopping."*

Before the Family Intervention Project, the family had a range of professionals involved – including the police, housing, youth offending teams, educational welfare and Connexions.

Parenting is still difficult. Donna is now a full time carer to Todd, 8, who has a number of complicated medical problems including a condition that stops the brain growing, causing learning and speech difficulties. Her youngest child is 1 year old, and was another unplanned pregnancy.

## Helen

Helen has five children aged 15, 14, 11, 9 and 3. She was 16 when she met her partner. He has a child from a previous relationship whom she also looked after. Helen dropped out of school in her final year – she has worked most of her life, although her partner only works intermittently. Her partner was also one of five children, and he grew up in what Helen says was not a loving home – he was also in care.

*“My son, Richard, was the problem why the [Family Intervention Project] got involved. My partner didn’t get on with him...he’s had difficulties since the age of 5...he was misbehaving, setting fire to things, he’d bully his sister, destroy his toys...he set a fire in his bedroom and he hit other kids...”*

*“I told the head teacher I expected it at home so they should expect it at school...they wouldn’t give him a chance...”*

He was first excluded from school age 9 for swearing and throwing chairs – but the tipping point was when he shouted racist abuse. He was permanently excluded and started attending for short periods at a pupil referral unit. Before that Helen would have to bring him home at lunch times as he wasn’t allowed to stay on school premises.

Helen says that the family would probably have been evicted if they hadn’t worked with the Family Intervention Project. Richard was hanging around with Helen’s sister’s children – his cousins – causing trouble in the local area. Helen says she almost got fired from her job in the local supermarket because of his behaviour in the shop’s grounds. Helen would go out looking for him occasionally and if she tried to keep him at home she says he would climb out of a window, even if she had hidden his trainers he would go out barefoot. Helen says she asked for help with him when she noticed something was wrong with him around the age of 5 but the doctors didn’t offer anything. She has been asked to leave shops because of his behaviour.

*“He would be throwing stuff at people walking by, scratching cars, setting fires, graffiti – I’d always have the police and wardens knocking on my door...”*

Helen says she thinks that neighbours should have shown Richard respect and his behaviour wouldn’t have been so bad. She also believes that the poor relationship between Richard and his father was one of the reasons his behaviour was so bad, and that because her own partner didn’t have good parenting role models from his own upbringing, he struggled with his son when his son’s behaviour became difficult.

## Jill

Jill hadn't left the house for nearly two years when the Family Intervention Project started working with her and her family. She wasn't looking after herself, and spent most of her time in bed. She was involved with social services and the Youth Offending Team because her daughter was in trouble with the police. She was at risk of being evicted, and she had struggled to cope with behaviour of her three children.

*"I was very depressed, I hadn't been out of the house for nearly two years. Yeah I wasn't washing, I wasn't keeping myself clean, nothing...I slept in bed all day and like got up like when Leah came home from school, and then just basically laid on the sofa, I just didn't have any life or any enthusiasm to do anything at all and I just, like you know I kept my appointments with the doctor and I just felt that every time I went I felt like even worse and I looked ill, I looked absolutely rotten. I lost a lot of weight..."*

Jill was in care as a child. Whilst her two older siblings stayed with their biological mum, Jill went to live with her grandparents when she was very little. When they became too ill to look after her she went back to her mum's for a couple of years.

*"Then I was abused by our next door neighbour, I was only living with my mum probably about three weeks when it started, and it didn't end until I was eleven, when I told my mum...yeah and other children that lived in our village, they came forward that he had done it to them as well. Yeah I was the first one to stand up. And then I went into foster care..."*

Four sets of foster parents and two children's homes followed although the last set of foster parents was a happy two years for Jill. *"I can remember everything about living with them, like my birthdays, Christmases that I had with them, everything and I can't really remember any of the others. But I'm still in contact with them now, like they see my children and stuff."*

Owen was born when Jill was 17, to an 18 year old partner she had met at school. Social services were involved from the start and told her to leave her partner or she would have the baby removed; she thinks this was because he had been involved in fighting with the police. She left and moved back with her foster parents at first, and then to live with her biological mum for a time.

*"When I first got the house she reported me to social services and said that I wasn't looking after him properly and feeding him...kept telling me I was doing this wrong, and doing that wrong and in the end I just thought no I'm not having this woman tell me what to do, you know, she couldn't be bothered to bring me up and so I'm not going to let her do it to my children, and so I left there and quite luckily I went to the council and they put me like in this mother and baby hostel and I was in there for about a year and then I got my first house."*

She moved a couple more times before meeting Clare's dad and was quickly pregnant with Clare. *"Well I met him on the Thursday, he asked me to marry him on the Friday. Then I married him 50 days later! Completely like whirlwind, he swept me completely off my feet. Really nice looking, lovely man, but give him a pint and he would change completely. He took Owen to school and picked him up, absolutely lovely. Come Friday when he'd start having a drink...he'd come home and smash the flat up, and hit me and shout at Owen... and we split up...and then we got back together when I was like 8 months because I thought well I've got to give it a go for the baby's sake...and he tried to strangle me one night when I was asleep. And then a few days after that he tried hanging himself from the light in our bedroom.*

*"The first time he ever hit me properly was the day I came home from hospital, from having Clare. And he cried and he said he was really sorry and he'd never do it again. And yeah I don't know, I suppose being so naïve and I was besotted with him."*

One incident forced Jill to leave: *"He started ranting and raving, and throwing everything around. He was locking the door and he set light to the sofa and he said 'I'm going to sit here and watch you burn and when she's [baby Clare] screaming I'm going to know that she's screaming for her dad."*

To escape the fire Jill had to run naked with the baby to her neighbours. Her partner was convicted of criminal damage but then moved in with the woman who lived in the flat above Jill – who he quickly married and had a child with. She says she was desperate to move away from him as he used to watch her out of his window, but it took two years to be re-housed.

Then Jill met Leah's dad and initially had a happy relationship; he adopted the older children. But then she found out that he had run up £18,000 of debt without her knowledge. That relationship breaking down she says was the reason for her life going downhill; she never saw him again. She started drinking a lot and smoking cannabis. She became depressed – but wasn't getting any help.

Owen's behaviour in secondary school deteriorated around the time of the relationship split and he got excluded. He went into part time specialist schooling and managed to get some qualifications and a job. But after he also started binge drinking and smashed up the house a couple of times Jill asked him to leave. Then around the time Owen left home Clare, who had just started secondary school, started getting into trouble with the police. *"She changed completely...My depression got worse and worse...she was in trouble with the police, I was sitting in the police station for hours on end, taking her to court..."*

Jill felt unable to cope with Clare's conduct; she was committing anti-social behaviour and the Youth Offending Team were involved. *"I tried to put her in foster care when she was 15, I took her to social services and said, 'Enough's enough, I can't cope with her any more, you're going to have to take her' and I just left her there and they brought her back...they decided they would do an*

*assessment...and then they sent me a letter saying there was nothing they could do for me..."*

Then her third child Leah started getting out of control at school when she reached juniors. By this point Jill wasn't leaving the house and Leah was caring for her mum. Jill was then diagnosed with cancer, for which she received treatment. Clare recently became pregnant but has miscarried.

## Karen

Karen has three children; two boys and the youngest, Sophie, a girl. Her first, Jack, was born when she was 17. Karen's mum was also a teenage mum. She left home when Karen was a teenager to live with a new partner.

Karen says the father of the two boys was controlling and verbally abusive. She describes herself when she met him as having no respect for herself. After they split up she had, *"Tonnes of relationships with loads of knobheads...I think because my self esteem was so low I thought that's all I deserve."* Domestic violence was a reoccurring pattern in these relationships, particularly with her youngest child's dad.

From adolescence onwards both boys were violent to Karen, including what she describes as them, *"stamping on her head"*.

*"...what I used to do is knock on my neighbours and actually say to them, 'Phone the police, if you can hear me screaming phone the police, I'm not going to take offence'... Two o'clock one morning Jack decided, I had a big black eye and everything, he decided to punch me and I don't remember much apart from the police coming in...I actually went to her the next day and I thanked her and she went, 'It weren't me' and I was like, 'Okay, whether it was or not, thank you'...But another one of my neighbours, she used to, as soon as she heard anything, she used to bomb it into our house and pin one of the boys down for me, and she was only five foot herself."*

Jack has ADHD. Her second son, Scott, was diagnosed with ADHD and borderline bipolar disorder at 13. He also has Aspergers. Karen says she had asked for help with Scott earlier than this but didn't get what she needed. Both boys are medicated but were refusing to take their medication.

Both boys were in trouble at school. *"They were at home more than at school because they couldn't control them...What the school's concern was, he mentioned that he slept with a knife under his pillow, and that's what alerted them to 'Oh shit, there's something wrong'. And what it was is, he was scared that my daughter's dad would come and kill us all, so he was the protector..."*

*"Jack has been aggressive all the way through, but Scott he started puberty at nine and that's when it all went 'whoa', so he was abusive, verbally to his first teacher...and she used to phone me and tell me that he called her a lesbian, I used to have phone calls all the time. He got excluded from lunchtime because he was abusive towards the dinner staff."*

*"[Scott's] brother got attacked in a classroom with a teacher being present, and Scott was in the next classroom and witnessed it and basically went through the classroom knocked this kid. Scott is huge for his age...he was 5' 10" at aged 12, size twelve shoes, just massive. All his mates were like 5' at a push so he just socked this lad that was two years above him, knocked him straight out for picking on Jack. Even though they beat each other senseless at home, both of them have got this like incredible... 'you don't touch my*

*brother'....I think in the first year he got excluded ten times, second year about seventeen, third year about nineteen."*

The situation at home affected the health of Karen and her youngest child who also had a number of health problems including bed wetting. The combination of the worsening behaviour of the boys at home and at school and the increasing violence towards Karen led her to phone social services to ask for help.

*"I phoned social services, also Scott used to get out the car at traffic lights and on dual carriageways and stuff like that...and you're looking for him. But this one day he was really, really violent to me, both the boys were and I phoned up social services, 'I need help, nobody's helping me' they went, 'Oh no, we're now 'Child Services', we only help if you're violent to the kids' and I went, 'Give me five minutes' and she went 'No, no, no, no!' they still didn't help me... The family therapist came with the social worker because she could see what help we needed, but her hands were tied because she didn't know, she's there but it's I don't know how much involvement her role can give, but she came with the social worker and the social worker went, 'There's nothing I can do', so off she went."*

Karen estimated there had been up to fifteen workers in their life over the years and described the situation as, "all or nothing...services stop and you don't know why". The Family Therapist "...went off sick and no contact and then I mentioned to the psychiatrist and she went, 'oh, I didn't know you needed her anymore'..."

She reported that the times when several workers from multiple agencies were there was the most difficult, "...because you spend half your time fending off your kids and fighting against school, and then the other half actually phoning about seven different people saying 'this incident happened, this incident happened'.

*"The boys wound up local boys so the house was always under attack with other children trying to break in. The boys thought it was funny...we had a social worker as well at the time, we were having our door kicked in by kids on the street whilst she was trying to talk to us all inside, and she was trying to calm down the lads and Sophie and me while these people are trying to kick in our door. And it's like, 'This is what we're living in, it's not just in the house it's out of the house' and it was just mayhem. I think she was terrified in the house, I think she thought they were going to smash in the door and beat everybody up and, and I was like, 'This is daily occurrence'".*

## Kim

Kim, 42, is a single mum with 12 children. Her children were causing chaos at home and at school, and in the local area. Kim was drinking heavily and often absent, the house was full of rubbish and she was facing eviction.

Kim went into foster care when she was 3 along with her sister and other siblings. Her father was a violent alcoholic and her mother had left home.

*"I grew up in care...My dad's a bit of an alcoholic, he's dead now. The reason I went into care is...through violence, but my mum left us, so we went into care. And, because we went into that care when it was long term, apparently now if you adopt children now, it makes it so much easier...but we was in the long-term one."*

She met her partner in a homeless hostel. *"His family...I thought were disgusting – but it's what we turned into."*

Kim's first child was born when she was 17 and she went on to have eight others with a violent partner. The next three children are to three other fathers. Early on in their life, the two eldest children had spent a period in care. Kim's partner carried out horrific violence against Kim throughout their relationship and afterwards, raping Kim at knifepoint.

It was a long process to get him out of the family home. After he had eventually left, he broke in several times. *"He actually broke in...and I woke up to him suffocating me with my youngest crying next to me..."*

At one point Kim let some of the children live with him. She says it was an attempt to stop him causing problems and terrorising the rest of the family but when he was violent to them they came back to live with her. The children were terrified of their father and tried to protect their mum with the older children not going to school so they could stay at home in case he came over.

The family moved at least four times in an attempt to get away from her violent ex-partner. One of the houses they lived in was burned down destroying all of their personal possessions – Kim suspects her ex-partner of setting the fire, and she was given £400 to replace its contents.

*"There's no proof that he set the house on fire, but we know he did. We ended up with nothing. We had to get out, my mate put me up. In the end there was this one incident, it was that bad, he said, 'Let me have some of the kids and it'll stop'. Didn't want the old ones, because the older ones have got ... they've seen so much. I let him have the young one."*

Kim drank too much and regularly went off drinking, leaving the children.

*"To start it was something to blank it out, my dad was an alcoholic, they say it's hereditary, there was another side to me...my dad he had a nasty side. I was turning into what I never wanted to be."*

Kim was increasingly unable to function. The children became aggressive, intimidating neighbours and not going to school. The oldest two daughters were not in college or working, the 15 year old was not attending school at all and the 14 year old was only attending occasionally. Kim's 12 year old son had been permanently excluded and was attending (but only irregularly) a Pupil Referral Unit. Kim's four children of primary school age were attending school occasionally, the children didn't wear school uniform as they were supposed to, and the 4 year old was not attending nursery. Some of the children were on the edge of being taken into care.

Kim's sons were in trouble with the police and neighbours were complaining about their anti-social behaviour. One had set fire to a property, causing around £60,000 worth of damage. The two eldest sons were involved with crime and the 15 year old was being investigated for handling stolen goods.

Kim's home was in a bad state – the back garden was strewn with rubbish, there were no beds for the children, they all slept on the floor. By 2008 she was told to work with the Family Intervention Project or face eviction.

*“It got to the point where the kids wouldn't sleep without music, the doors had to be shut...there was no point having doors... they wouldn't shut the doors because, you know that thing...when the door is closed, you don't know what's behind it.”*

Before the Family Intervention Project, Kim's family were in contact with a number of public sector agencies and officials including, Social Services, Housing, the Police, the Anti-Social Behaviour office, Connexions Service, the Fire and Rescue Service, four schools, a Pupil Referral Unit, and Education Welfare Officer, two school nurses, a health 'Multi Agency Locality Team', Alcohol Problem Advisory service, Environmental Health, the Youth Offending Team, a debt advice service, a youth intervention service providing 'positive activities', a behaviour support team, and Catch 22 a charity that provides support to young people.

*“God, I felt like I was on a firing line, do you know it felt like, it's all of the bad things, you don't really want to be told all the bad things, because you know it's happening... you think, 'My god, I want to die. This is not me really'. But that was the thing, and that's what they did, you got so many barriers up because you knew they was judging you, that you wouldn't even allow them to come in, because here we go again, I'm not as good as the person with two parents, I'm not as good as the person that's got, because I ain't got a job and it's all this, because I've gone through all this, now you're judging me.*

*“...at first you don't know what you need as well, even though you think you know, you don't know...because you are right there smack in the middle, you don't really see it. In the end you don't see...you see yourself as the victim. We lived next door to ASBO children, then mine became worse than them...a few years earlier I would have been mortified.*

*"I thought it can't go on like this. I needed a shake...and sometimes you do need that, and just because you need help doesn't mean you're no less than anybody else. And your children don't even fall into any rank being lower than anybody else.*

*"You're not supposed to bring another life into the world when your world is falling down around you, but you think it's going to be better each time...you do it for yourself.. I think I'll never get over the fact that I feel like I let my own children down. I messed my children up just as much, and I think that's because basically I couldn't cope with what had happened."*

Kim is now in another violent relationship. The two eldest girls are still out of work and trying to get housing. *"My daughter was told she needed to be pregnant to get housing"*. Her eldest son has two children now and her eldest daughter has one and another on the way. At 42, she already has four grandchildren.

## Lindsey

Lindsey is 38 and has two young adult sons and a 10 year old daughter with a different dad. Lindsey's own dad was convicted of sexually abusing her three young cousins.

*"I had regular contact [with him], it wasn't until my daughter reached the age of either 9, 10, 11 months old, when the child protection services from the police station came and arrested my dad – from my house...I wasn't aware of anything like that ever happening. If I did, I think I would have been a bit more dubious and more aware, but I didn't think anything of it, and I just let my dad be around my three kids."*

Lindsey moved out from home and started having children at 16. *"I kind of got a bit out of control. I left home at 16, fell pregnant with Connor my eldest...then about 23 months later I had Luke..."*

The sons' dad started being violent to Lindsey when she was pregnant with Luke. *"At the time when I had Connor I was in [a] hostel and then I moved from there into my own home. Things seemed to be going alright for a while and then I fell pregnant with Luke and their dad started physically abusing me, he was being violent and everything else."*

Lindsey describes him as having special needs and learning difficulties. He was also charged with sexually abusing his niece, which she discovered when she was five months pregnant with Luke.

*"Yes it was actually social care that had actually come out and told me that, because they give me a ultimatum, well a choice really, I either stay with him and I lose Connor and then when Luke was born I lose him, or to keep hold of both my boys and leave him. And I took the choice to leave him. I tried leaving him by myself without no help or support from my family and that, and he decided to shove me down the stairs when I was five and a half months pregnant with Luke, but luckily I didn't miscarry or lose him or anything. That like pushed me over the edge and I thought, right, I have got to get away. I rang my mum, my mum and my sister came out and they actually got me out the house and I moved back home."*

A few years later, Lindsey met a new partner who her mum had concerns about and the relationship between mother and daughter deteriorated. Lindsey was back living in a hostel again. *"We found out at the last minute, when I was so far pregnant...that he was a drug user. And then he turned violent. When I was about five months pregnant and I left him, he had actually threatened me saying he was going to inject me and the kids with heroin and overdose us."*

Lindsey managed to leave him with the help of Women's Aid and went to live in a refuge before being re-housed. *"I was absolutely petrified, I was shaking and everything and we got there and as soon as me and the kids had walked in through the refuge doors, a bit sigh of relief actually came off my shoulders."*

*I knew that with us being there, he couldn't actually get at us and me and the kids were safe. And then about a month or so of us being there he actually found us, so they had to move my kids from there to another hostel."*

Lindsey made friends with people in the hostel who then took advantage of her when she found permanent accommodation. There were a lot of different people visiting and staying at Lindsey's house, causing noise and anti-social behaviour for the neighbours and exploiting Lindsey and the children.

*"And then I got a safe house and then my friends, well my so-called friends, kept harassing me ...they decided to take advantage of my good nature and use it to abuse me and my children for money, food, use my gas, electric and everything else and physically bully and intimidate me and my children." This went on for nine years.*

Lindsey's two boys both have severe learning difficulties. Connor, the oldest boy was removed from the family home because he had sexually abused his sister, Abigail. *"I didn't know whether to believe her at the time and it was like well my child can't do things like that, I thought he's not capable of it, he's not got the understanding and awareness to do something as horrible as that to his own sister. I think I was in a bit of shock and denial...but when Abigail had gone for medicals it had come out that she had been tampered with."*

Connor went into foster care and then into a children's home but when he left care, Lindsey let him move back home and left him unsupervised with his brother and sister. The Family Intervention Project got involved because of the risk posed to Luke and Abigail by their brother being back at home and a number of other concerns over their welfare. Luke and Abigail reported physical abuse and abusive language from their mum.

*"I think at the time I just had this massive breakdown and I was absolutely sick of services, no trust in services whatsoever... Yes, and I think it just got to the point with me where I just completely broke down, I was freezing everybody out, didn't want to know and it was like, can't you just all get out my hair, get out my life, I don't want to know and I just like froze."*

The family had been known to social services for many years but Lindsey had not taken up any offers of help or referrals to agencies that could provide support. The children were put on a Child Protection Plan.

The threat of Abigail being taken into care was Lindsey's wake up call. *"I thought I am going to have to get this sorted. I am going to have to let [the Family Intervention Project] get involved...there is no way on earth that I am losing my daughter or my son...I thought, these kids are mine...And I just worked with them, in a way I am glad that I let them into mine and my kids' lives and sort things out.*

*"And then it got to the point, this particular day, for some strange reason things just snapped and just clicked into place and it was like I am going to do this, I am going to have to tackle things head on ... and I thought the quicker I*

*work with them, I thought the quicker I can get them off my back and I can start living my life...*

*“And then when [the Family Intervention Project worker] turned around to me and said to me...right that’s it, we are not coming back involved, all I wanted to do was to like sit there and cry, I wanted to grab hold of her and everything and say to her, you are not going, like that, I thought you are staying with me and the kids, I thought we are not losing you...”*

*“I just feel like to me I have got my family back to what it was before my so-called friends got involved. Because me and the kids used to be really happy and then they got involved and things went downhill and now I have got myself and my three kids back.”*

## Melissa

Melissa has four children; her first was born when she was 18. Three of her children have physical health problems. Her partner Steven is the biological father of the three youngest children and is often in prison. He also has three older children from a previous relationship who have sometimes lived with Melissa and caused problems; complicated by the fact that Steven continued his relationship with their mother while living with her.

Melissa has been evicted from one of her homes which she blames on Steven's daughters causing trouble in and around her property:

*"They've robbed me blind, they've burgled my house and everything...And it were like I had a little wall outside my garden and everybody used to just come swearing over, people robbing there you know and not just that, with Steven being in trouble this copper was determined, he were telling me he would get me evicted but my landlord didn't want it personally."*

Steven is currently serving a prison sentence for burglary and has spent time in prison off and on throughout their relationship. The children had been subject to child protection plans for two years for neglect and emotional harm. Social services were particularly concerned about poor school attendance and the state the home was in. They had been on the verge of initiating proceedings to take the children into care twice. *"They started the neglect case...with me not being there constantly for Bailey...and I had Steven's older kids living with me in my house...they'd literally trashed my house...Steven went to prison and they ruined it."*

The youngest child Bailey has been in foster care since he was 1 year old. *"Even though I love him with all me heart it were just too much for me. My partner's in prison and he were in prison when he (Bailey) were born...but it's like Bailey's got medical complex needs, he's got barely minimum bowel so he needed two parents to care for him rather than one."*

Melissa admits at the time her focus was on trying to please Steven rather than the children. *"I felt like if I didn't do what Steven like wanted me to do, like if he said do this jump how high and if I didn't do it I felt like I were always the bad one d'ya know what I mean?"* She tried to smuggle drugs into prison for him – she got caught and ended up in prison herself. The children were cared for by their grandma, Jean, while Melissa was in prison.

Melissa is one of three children. Melissa's mum Jean is one of four and Jean's own childhood was difficult. *"My mum used to batter me all the time...She hated me, she actually told me when I were 12 that she hated me..."* Jean brought Melissa and her other two children up alone after she split from her violent husband. Melissa describes her dad, *"The last time that my dad were at home I were 5 and I got covered in me mum's blood where me dad battered her, that were the last childhood memory I have of my dad being there"*.

Jean had trouble with her eldest boy, Melissa's brother, from the age of 13. *"He actually went to hit me...I chucked an ashtray at him. That was my way that time...Lashing out, I used to chuck. Every time I took something they used to...scarper. I did it, I chucked an ashtray and it smashed and he goes 'that'll be last time you ever done that because next time you do it I'll stab ya' and he took knife to me but he went to my mate's and he were there for about a week. And she made sure he went to school and that, I were missing him...eventually we got back."*

None of Jean's children stayed at school to do exams although her youngest has done some studying in college and Melissa did industrial cleaning course in prison. Jean says her other children have stayed out of trouble with the law, although this doesn't seem entirely the case:

*"No [they have] never been in trouble apart from her which went to prison – it's only one what's been in trouble with the police...I think they only ever got a caution when they were little and that were Gavin got a caution for being carried on a TWOC [Taking Without Consent]...and Shane got a caution. Odd caution for burglary...But it weren't nothing."*

Jean who is 51, already has ten grandchildren, *"My daughter's got four, even though she don't have one living with her, me eldest has got four, me youngest has got two..."*

The Family Intervention Project got involved when Melissa was about to be released from prison. *"After I went to prison last year that were my big wake up call and it were a case of now or never and I weren't willing to lose my kids for no-one."*

Melissa is waiting to hear whether she can get work as a cleaner. *"Then I'll be working. Then I'll be happy."* But there are concerns about the effect of Steven's release from prison will have on the family. *"Hopefully this time he's realised, it's not like every other time 'I'm not going back, I'm not going back'...but with how much I've gone through this time on my own...I've told him if he goes back I'm walking."*

## Nicole

Nicole, 28, has two sons. Dylan lives with Nicole and her older son Max currently lives with his granddad, Nicole's father.

Nicole was on the verge of eviction when she started working with the Family Intervention Project. She had received two formal warnings from her housing provider and there was a threat of injunction proceedings to stop her anti-social behaviour. In parallel, Nicole was facing the prospect of the local authority taking her younger son Dylan into care because of her neglect. Nicole's stark choice was work with the Family Intervention Project or face eviction and the possibility of losing Dylan. *"They'd basically said if I don't start sorting my life out they're going to...start court proceedings to take him off me."*

*"I started drinking and doing drugs as a teenager. Stuff escalated. I've lived on my own since I was 16. Had a violent relationship. My child was on child protection. I was really close to losing him. I were partying a lot and my neighbours were complaining to the council so they were going to put an injunction on me but then with Dylan being on child protection and all that going on they suggested that I started working with [the Family Intervention Project]. And I started picking up from there. I worked well because I wanted to change, I was fed up of all the partying lifestyle...and obviously I wanted to keep my son."*

Nicole was raped as a small child, by her half brother Gary. Nicole's mum Barbara had also been raped and sexually abused, by her mother's boyfriend, throughout her childhood from the age of 4 until 18. Aged 18, Barbara had become pregnant by her abuser with Gary. After Gary raped his half sister Nicole, he was taken into care.

*"I had a few problems growing up...I was raped at 4...my half brother did it...My Grandma's boyfriend raped my mother from the age of 4 to 18 and then when she was 18 she got caught pregnant."*

From an early age she started smoking and drinking, and as a young teenager she used drugs and went out partying. She was bullied at school and simply stopped going at 14. She started college but dropped out.

*"I was doing hairdressing and beauty as well because that's what I wanted to do...But when I was 16 I got my own flat and I moved because I was getting bullied a lot and it just was getting too much to get to college everyday and affording a flat so I gradually stopped going."*

*"I was young and naïve when I was a teenager. I was screwed up from my kid trauma, that did screw me up a lot...I weren't mental, or psychotic, but I liked to have a good old drink...along with the partying and a flat to keep running...it all got a bit too much."*

At 17, she started a relationship with a young man and went to Ireland to be with him. The relationship didn't work out and she moved back, and then found out she was pregnant. After the birth she asked her parents to take care of her son. *"Depression, it just all got too much, so when Max were about three or four months old and I asked me mum if she could have him."*

Not longer after, she met Dylan's dad Matt. *"The day after my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. And that's where it all goes Pete Tong again. It were all alright but he were violent to me and all chaotic... His mum's not right. He hadn't had a good upbringing..."* Matt was violent. *"He has raped me, he got arrested for that"* although Nicole says she didn't press charges.

Social services became concerned about her youngest son Dylan as a result of Nicole attacking her ex-partner, Dylan's dad. Dylan also wasn't attending nursery regularly and his speech and development were slow. Nicole was also hanging around with some dubious people who were coming round to the house.

*"[Matt] was still in my life, making it difficult, causing me hassle and we were getting drunk one night and he started and I flipped out because of everything I've been through – I've never lashed out at him and the police got involved and that's why Dylan got put on child protection... He was on a child protection plan just to look at mine and Stephen's backgrounds because of the violence and that in the past so, you know, he had to be on it. But I were a speed addict back then."*

Nicole's life was getting increasingly out of control. She was taking more and more speed, during the day as well as when she was partying at night. The neighbours made a number of complaints to the council and the police about noise, loud music and anti-social behaviour. After issuing her with two formal warnings, a housing officer referred Nicole to the Family Intervention Project – she would have to work with them or risk losing her house.

Nicole has had only one job at the age of 18 for four months but says it was 'too much' and has not worked or studied since. However recently, since working with the Family Intervention Project, Nicole has gone back to college and achieved Level 3 English.

*"I'm thinking of getting a job. Just a little part-time one, you know, when they at school, you know, to help which will work out childcare wise and then I won't have to fork out travel costs because that's another big thing, isn't it? If you're having to put food and rent, you don't want to be forking out for travel costs, do you?"*

Nicole is no longer under threat of eviction and Dylan is no longer at risk of being taken into care.

## Sarah

Sarah has two children – Tammy and Dean. Sarah was sexually, physically and mentally abused by family members and family friends as a child. A nursery worker noticed the first signs of sexual abuse.

*“I was being changed...they saw I was red...there were bruises and evidence to say someone had their hands in my nappy...It is shocking because from 1-11, I was abused. To me...a 1 year old baby you look at and coo over it. You don't look at a 1 year old baby and get cheap thrills, so what was different about me, that's what I kept asking myself, what so different about me?...I had people touch me in ways that you wouldn't want to touch a child, and I had things said to me that...I was hit by blokes. My cheekbones are fractured, my collar bone is fractured. I've got broken bones that ain't been fixed, it's just like...nothing is ever going to change that, the only thing that can change that is my kids and that's, as long as I can keep them protected, I'm protected.”*

Sarah went into care aged 1 but was back to live with her mum as a young child. Her dad left when she was a baby. *“My mum had just about managed to get all my little, all the bits that you need for a baby, and because he couldn't handle being a dad, liked his drink too much, he stole everything that my mum had bought by herself [and sold] to the next door neighbour, for twenty quid for some cans of beer.”*

Her mum had concurrent partners who she allowed to sleep in Sarah's room as a little girl. She went back into care around the age of 6.

*“They took me into care again...my mum was in bed one morning with my little sister, and it was, everyone was asleep and I was so hungry, I was like, 'please get up and get me some breakfast' she was like, 'in a minute, in a minute' and wrapped her arms around my sister and...I just thought, she's a bitch, and I says, 'if you don't make me my breakfast, I'm going to get a knife and I'm going to stick it straight through you' and she rang social services, rather than make my breakfast. I remember when they come and took me out of the house, and they took me away.”*

She was placed in foster care but was sexually abused by her foster dad and foster brother. After coming out of care Sarah lived with her mum again.

*“And, my biggest question is, and it still is today, and I've asked my mum, is she was abused for sixteen years in the same way that I was, by her foster brother... so as a parent why wouldn't you want to protect your child? Why wouldn't you stop your child going through what you went through? Well, I'll tell you now, and on the record, if I ever suspected my little girl getting abused in any way possible...I would chop that man's bit off and make him eat it. I would torture him, I'd kill him. I'd move heaven and earth, there's no doubt about it, so why didn't my mum do that for me?”*

*“...when I read [my] file it said that in one statement it said that Miss x [Sarah's mum] was having concurrent partners and letting strange men sleep in Sarah's room. What the fuck is that about? I'm a baby in cot, what is that about?...from the age of 1 and I was taken off my mum. And she said, 'I did love you Sarah because I fought eight court cases to get you back'. Whoopee*

*doo, she should have left there because at least I wouldn't have been abused for sixteen years..."*

Sarah's mum also had an appalling childhood. At three weeks old she went into care. She lived with a foster family who had three of their own children and another foster child. Both foster children were abused.

*"I've got the file, I'm allowed it, my mum will give it to me...I read it...I was trying to figure out what was going on in my life, but I found out all about what was going on in hers, so I've got two visions, one of my mum and obviously I know what happened to me. My mum had things done to her you wouldn't do to your worst enemies...So, when you're hung from a lampshade by the cord over a chest freezer with a black bag waiting for you and then when your breath goes and he sees it and cuts the cord and ready for you to drop in the freezer, that's just disgusting...she was made to eat dog food from a baked bean tin...made to do sexual activities on him from the age of 7. Her and [the other foster child] were both so badly abused, [he] ended up hospitalised... she was malnourished at the age of 2 years old, you could see her bones, you touched her and you bruised her, she was so malnourished. They had pictures of my mum where she'd gone a school where they'd hacked her hair off with shears..."*

*"Yeah, my mum got £15,000 compensation pay out, she could have got more, but she was so scared to go to court and face him over again, she refused, so she settled out of court, fifteen grand..."*

Sarah's mum moved a lot which meant Sarah had little stability even when she wasn't in care, *"I'm 25 and I've lived at fifty-three addresses"*. When life reached crisis point Sarah's mum upped and left wherever she was living for the next place. Sarah remembers how they left in the middle of the night to move back to Newtown after her mum had a sexual relationship with one of her own brothers.

Jenny, Sarah's grandma, had five children, three of whom went into care and two stayed living their mum. All three of the siblings who went into care were abused and have mental health problems as adults. *"Ian has ADHD and mental problems, he was abused in an all boys children's home, Barry with schizophrenia, my mum has medical issues...all three of them were abused in some way or another..."*

Sarah's mum had her at 19 and Sarah was a young mum too – she had her daughter Tammy when she was 16. Sarah, her boyfriend and her daughter lived with her mum for a time but it wasn't long before their relationship ended. Sarah suffered from post-natal depression and couldn't bond with her daughter. For the first eight months she went out a lot leaving her mum to look after the baby overnight. *"I should have been there...but to me it was her trying to do what she should have done for me ...– the amount of times that she's said to me, 'Put Tammy into care...'"*

Tammy has a range of physical and emotional problems. *"...I knew there was something wrong with Tammy from 14 months old, where she stopped talking, she turned to a mute and then she started head butting the floors and biting herself. She does not sleep. She slept for about two hours a night from birth."*

*"Tammy is 8 years old and still wets the bed, she had to go to incontinence clinic...she regurgitates about thirty times a day, so she's got chronic reflux syndrome, insomnia, peaker disorder, split personality disorder, ADHD. We were trying to rule out autism, but they're not 100% sure and she's on steroids, she's on liquid medicine, she's on lactose, she's on stuff to keep food down, stuff to bring food up, stuff for her behaviour, stuff to sleep... it's one thing after another."*

Up until having her first child Sarah hadn't talked to anyone about her own abuse; *"...the first ever time I'd ever said anything, and that was it, the first and last time I'd ever said anything 'til I was 16, 'til I was pregnant with Tammy, and then I shouted it out...it just came out the whole lot, just came out like vomit."*

Sarah didn't always go to school and left at the end of Year 10 without any GCSEs. She was taking ecstasy and speed at 13 and shoplifting at 14. *"Yeah, at 19 I got arrested, in between obviously these, I got arrested for burglaries, assault, common assault, GBH, ABH, you name it, I could not walk along the street without knocking someone out, it was just, I could not do it, I physically couldn't walk by so long without beating up..."* She has received two suspended prison sentences, one was for keeping drugs for somebody who was in prison, which she says acted as a wake up call; *"The thought of losing my little girl to care scared the life out of me."* Currently on license, Sarah is coming towards the end of the suspended sentence period, without any further problems.

*"I'm being a good girl. I have been a good girl for a long time, so from before to now, yeah no more getting arrested..."*

Sarah first got involved with the Family Intervention Project through a toddler group she went along to, when her uncontrollable anger was noticed by others.

*"Anyway, Tammy had created in this toddler group one day and some woman, and I do know her, and she's really nice, anyway she stood up and intervened and it was just, it weren't exactly the good thing to do. I admit, I have got a very short fuse, and I did have a shorter one even then... I was just like, 'Go away, get out of my face because I will head butt you' and then I realised where I was and it was like, parents and kids were all staring at me. My own kids were staring at me, and I did burst into tears. I was crying so uncontrollably they got me...a Family Support Worker."*

Sarah is currently with the partner of her second child who she has been with for six years, and despite the difficulties of coping with Tammy, including the panic that what has happened to her will be repeated in her daughter, she feels pleasure in being a parent.

*"Dean has got every tool set you could possibly buy for a kid, he knows how to ride a bike without stabilisers, he's out of nappies, he rides up and down the stairs on his bike, he knows how to ride skates and a scooter...he knows how to swim and he is at nursery and he knows his numbers 1-20, his ABCs and his colours – that is my little star."*

## Stella

Stella has three children; Amy, Isaac and Becky. She also has two grandchildren. Stella was 3 when she was given away by her mum to her dad and step mother.

*"My mother was a prostitute and my father obviously married my mother. And anyway my father met somebody else, got with her, my mother dumped me on his doorstep and said, 'Here you can have this bitch, I hate her.' I was 3 years old at the time. My little brother was 1 year old, his intestines were wasted away because we were so starved. I ate a full packet of biscuits, I had shoes on that were too small for me...I got told all this when I was eight years old. I was sexually abused by my dad, I was beaten by my dad, emotionally abused by my dad, made to feel that I was stupid, I was worthless, not even worth breathing oxygen or nothing. And I got put into care at 15 years old, and I have to say it's the best place I ever lived at the kids' home, I loved it."*

Stella's dad was violent and sexually abused her from the age of 7.

*"But the beatings, you could guarantee every single day right, I would either get told that I looked like a man, or I would get told I am an ugly bastard or I would get told that I should just die and get it over with...my dad would have us all in a row with our pants down bent over with a belt, and say 'right which one of you has done it?'...because I owned up...he would pass the belt to my brothers and my sister to beat me with it. My sister hit me with the belt knowing what she had done hurt me more than anything else..."*

Stella went into care aged 15 after her father's sexual abuse of her and her step sister was reported to the police. An earlier attempt by her sister to tell the school had come to nothing. Stella lived in a Children's Home for nineteen months, which she describes as a positive experience as she no longer feared daily beatings – but also as very lonely as her step mother wanted no more to do with her, and her brothers and sisters were told to ignore her. After her dad was arrested Stella says that her step mum told the police, *"...that they better not bring me back because she would kill me....I had nobody and it was really, really hard. 15 years old and you are alone in the world."* Her dad was sentenced to six years in prison.

She went to catering college, had a work placement and moved in to a hostel – but fell in with a bad crowd, began to sniff glue and dropped out. After getting kicked out of the hostel she spent some time living rough.

*"I was homeless over Christmas...there's a massive car park...and to walk to town from the car park you have got to go under an arch thing and I slept under there every night. And one night I had stolen a packet of jaffa cakes from Marks and Spencer and my conscience never let me live that down at all, even though I was starving, my brain was telling me I shouldn't have done it, because it's not something I believe in and stuff like that, I was sorry I did it."*

She then went to another foster placement where she met and started going out with a fellow 17 year old, Jimmy, who had just come out of care himself. Stella had to leave the foster placement once she was pregnant with Amy, and she also left catering college. Not long after this Jimmy left her to live with her step sister.

Stella met Ray when she was seven months pregnant with Amy. They brought Amy up together and went on to have Becky and Isaac. Ray brought stability to Stella's life. She describes him as *"...a brilliant man and he taught me how to love basically, love my children...I made sure that I wasn't anything like my parents."* However the legacy of the sexual, physical and emotional abuse Stella suffered at the hands of her dad had a major impact on her relationship with Ray. They split up, though remained close. *"I had no help with nothing. No counsellor or nothing. I was just left to deal with my life... I'd left my children's dad about ten years ago. The simple fact is I got to a point where I couldn't even bear him to touch me. I still loved him, he still meant the world to me, but I couldn't cope with him touching me so I left him to try and sort myself out. I knew that that was because of the abuse I had suffered when I was a child."*

When he was still little Isaac went to live with Ray, and Stella saw him during the holidays. The girls stayed living with Stella. Ray was diagnosed with cancer when Isaac was 6. Isaac had to care for his dad until he died some years later. Stella believes this had an effect on Isaac and his behaviour worsened. The first time Isaac was brought home by the police he was 11.

Stella says that Amy too was a difficult child and became pregnant with her son Mason age 15, at the time that step dad died. After Amy's son was born she went out partying a lot leaving Stella to look after Mason: *"...the police would bring Amy back wrecked out of her head in the middle of the night while she had her son asleep in her bedroom."* All of this was happening at the same time as Isaac was getting into trouble with the police.

The police referred the family to the Family Intervention Project primarily because of Isaac's anti-social behaviour; he was about to receive an ASBO. The police were also concerned about the amount of alcohol and cannabis Stella, Amy and Isaac were using and that the children were left to their own devices. The family were under threat of eviction, no rent had been paid for twelve months and the property was in a mess.

*"Isaac, right I didn't know was on cannabis, but a couple of months ago got caught at school with a ten bag of cannabis on him...Basically, people would turn around to me and say because I smoke cannabis Amy smokes it because of me – it isn't. Amy smokes it because of the people that she went around with...Amy was 15 years old, if it was me right, bearing in mind I have been smoking cannabis since Isaac was two, Amy would have been on cannabis a lot longer before that if it was me."*

Two years after Mason was born, Amy had another child, Layla. Amy was living in her own home and her two children were suffering from neglect. Amy, who was 18, was also having a sexual relationship with 14 year old boy. Jimmy (Amy's father) committed suicide, and for some time Mason and Layla were placed in care, but now live with Jimmy's parents, with Stella and Amy being allowed to visit them at a contact centre under supervision.

*"So Isaac was seeing all this while he was growing, Amy thinking it's funny and really not getting where she is going wrong. Then the police got involved obviously because [he] was a minor and stuff like that. It ended up where she got the kids taken off her because apparently the flat was a state or something."*

Stella's middle child Becky has not been in trouble, has finished college and is looking for a job. Stella believes that she is her 'rock' just as her father Ray had been before he died.

Stella does not work but is now working towards some qualifications. *"I am doing maths, English and IT... Basically because when I was at school because of being deaf, I didn't learn anything. I wish to God I wasn't deaf you know what I mean because the stuff I have learnt now is amazing. And it's been hard, but for the past five years right, I buy science magazines, astronomy magazines, astrology magazines, I am absolutely mad on space, I know everything that is out there. I know the history of the earth."*

## Susie and Jon

Susie and Jon have been victims of anti-social behaviour and are also perpetrators of violence against each other.

*“So we got together didn’t we and I got pregnant, we were getting quite serious... We had a lot of trouble when I was pregnant with the mother of his oldest child, she’s also got another child older than Jon’s. He used to come round threatening, putting windows through, throwing bricks at me when I was eight months pregnant we had to cope through that.”*

When they first got together they faced hostility from family and neighbours which they put down their sixteen year age gap.

*“We had a lot of anti-social behaviour towards us from the neighbours. They were calling Jon a paedophile...I had people sitting in my drive drinking and smoking drugs.*

*“We had a few police calls out, fighting on the front. We went away for the weekend didn’t we – and we came back, my child was about nine weeks old...dropped off in a taxi and [they] threatened the taxi driver. ‘What you bringing them back here for?’ As we were taking some of the stuff out the back of the taxi...one of these lads spat at me, pulled a knife out in you didn’t they. We were all fighting in the street.*

*“The cops were called out. Later that night they came back and they spray painted the whole house, throwing paint up the whole house. They basically terrorised the street, they smashed windows. They burned our bins. Uniform off the line, clothes, anything that you put out. They fed chicken bones to my dog.”*

Jon had depression after losing his job and Susie had post-natal depression after the birth of her eldest son. She contacted social services asking for help.

*“Now when we were in the other house where we were getting anti-social behaviour I contacted social services off my own back and said, ‘look Ben’s only a couple of weeks old, I need some help’. They came out. They did an assessment. I got a letter a week later saying ‘no you’re absolutely fine, you’ve got post-natal depression, your doctor is dealing with it, case closed.’”*

They moved to get away from the anti-social behaviour and were homeless but refused the housing association’s offers of alternative housing which they believed unsuitable. Eventually, they were re-housed.

Jon and Susie’s violence towards one another escalated and the police were called out a number of times. The police informed social services about the domestic violence and social services became involved with family.

The children were placed on a child protection plan for a time, which meant they were at risk of being taken into care. Susie and Jon attended an anger

management course and the children were removed from the child protection register. Social services involvement ended a year after the children were taken off the register but this meant that the child care help they had provided to give Susie a break also stopped and Susie struggled to cope again. Susie said she felt at her wits end.

*“Three times within the space of a month I’ve been down with the boys to the social services office and said, ‘...there you go take them because if you don’t take them I’m going to kill them’ and they went, ‘I don’t think so, you’re not leaving your kids here’ and pushing off out the door again. And that was it. Three times in the space of a month.”*

Susie recalls a stay in a refuge as a child. At one point she left Jon and went to a refuge for three weeks, but returned to him.

Their eldest son was diagnosed with blindness in one eye aged 3. Their younger son has learning difficulties. *“He didn’t start speaking until he was 5, this was due to what was happening inside the house.”*

More police callouts followed, often as a way to end arguments and allegations of violence were sometimes fabricated to ensure police attended, and the police made a referral to the Family Intervention Project. Jon and Susie have made a lot of progress since the project became involved, but still have problems. *“We have loads of problems...to this day we’re arguing with the council.”* Susie is now pregnant again.

## Wendy

Wendy has five children. Paul and Ryan live at home, along with her grandchild Logan.

The father of two of her children is a sex offender who raped his underage sister, and was charged whilst Wendy was pregnant with one of his children.

Wendy's second son Tony has been on drugs and in prison. He had the first of his three children, Jordan, when he was 15. Tony is now 30 and Wendy believes he is now reformed – he now has a job, a house and a new partner.

However, Jordan, now 15, has been involved with the police and social services. *“At the moment the way things are with Jordan, I'm not allowed Jordan at my house. He's got to prove to people that he's got to stay away from this area with the drugs and everything...”* There was also police involvement when Jordan was having a relationship with a 26 year old local woman.

Daughter Hannah had her son Logan when she was 17 and the baby's dad didn't believe that Logan was his. Wendy has taken care of Logan full time since he was eight months old, when her daughter walked out. Hannah has no contact with her son but has since had another baby.

*“...it was when she became 13, 14, she started thinking that she could go off at nights and stay out and not come home, and all stuff like this, and I even went to social services with her because, well actually she came home one day and she was like a little 2 year old child, jumping around and stuff like that because the police had actually brought her back home...And I actually threw something and it caught and it gave her a bruise on her legs, so I actually took her into social services myself and said that I had done it...And they told me I was smothering her, I was an over-protective mother.*

*“She started hanging around with people involved with drugs and they were more important than Logan...and then she came home one day and she was out of her face on drugs and drinking....and I said I'll tell you what, now walk out that door, I'll take Logan or I'll get in touch with social services...and she turned and walked out the door.”*

Wendy's youngest child Ryan has been excluded from school aged 11 and had home tutoring instead for two hours a week. He then went to a special school and Wendy says he was bullied.

*“They thought he suffered with ADHD. I knew there was something wrong with him going through infant school and I tried saying there was, except nobody picked up on it and found out he was dyslexic and had learning difficulties...When they moved his schools he got involved with some boys...got him sniffing aerosol cans and petrol, and God knows what else. When I took him away from all of that they targeted my house.”*

*“And actually one of the teachers had grabbed hold of him, pinned him to the floor, put red marks on his arms and on his neck so I phoned up the school and it didn’t go down on their records. And in this thing he actually spat and it caught a teacher in the face and the teacher actually tried getting him done for it. And he got took to court. And it...got chucked out of court...I got took to court, because [of].him not going to school and ended up with fines, and I pay fines for it.”*

Wendy believes that the family were targeted for anti-social behaviour from local boys who were fighting with Ryan, although Wendy is not clear about the amount of anti-social behaviour Ryan was also causing.

*“With Ryan, it wasn’t because of drugs...the police have been involved because of Ryan when he got involved with these boys...they started targeting the house they were coming round with threats...And on one occasion they even beat up Ryan with chains...No, what it was is Ryan had gone out with them and Ryan would bring them into his bedroom and...he’d stick something against the door and he wouldn’t let you in there, so they’d all be in his bedroom.”*

Wendy says it was hard keeping on top of all the services involved with her and her children and grand children, particularly she was concerned that her youngest grandchild would be taken from her because of the behaviour of the others:

*“I was getting one thing from the police, one thing from emergency social services another thing from Jordan’s social worker and another thing from our own social worker. Our own social worker was turning round and saying, ‘Jordan can’t come to your house because of the drugs’ and the other three were telling me, ‘Yeah he’s alright there, yeah he’s alright there you aint got no papers to say he can’t be there so he can be there’”.*

The Family Intervention Project became involved as a result of a family member setting fire to Wendy’s house while she and children were inside. Wendy was also charged with arson and perverting the course of justice, but only found guilty of the latter. The family member was sent to prison. Wendy denies she had anything to do with the fire. Subsequently she was placed in temporary accommodation and was taken off the list for eligible properties. Also, as a result of the fire, social services made both Logan and Ryan subject to a Child Protection Plan meaning that they thought the children were at risk of abuse.

*“I tried going to social services with Ryan, tried getting help...and Ryan was constantly in my face. I had Logan and Logan was only young then, he wasn’t sleeping, he was awake for days on end. And it wasn’t until the fact the fire occurred that social services were on my case to everyone saying that I wasn’t protecting my children.”*

Her youngest child Ryan is also now having problems. *“Ryan finds it difficult, where he went through this bullying process. He doesn’t like walking down the*

*street...you take him out and there's a few people he gets palpitations and then he starts shouting, 'I don't want to be here, take me home, get me out of here' and that's what he's like. I've even tried putting in for extra money for him...I don't know if I'll get it. I did have it before when he was first put as learning difficulties, at a lower rate."*

Once the Family Intervention Project became involved they found that the middle child Paul who had never before come to the attention of services was also in a lot of difficulty. He had, unsurprisingly, withdrawn from the rest of the family, developed agoraphobia and stayed locked in his room. He had also developed anorexia and was self harming.

## What the interviews tell us:

### ***Intergenerational transmission***

Overwhelmingly, the experiences of the women and couples we spoke to grew out of the families they grew up in. We did not meet many families whose problems did not start in their own childhood, or whose children, or some of their children, were not now repeating the same patterns as their parents. Intergenerational transmission of problems such as being in care, poor parenting, violence, abuse, low aspirations, non-attendance in school and few or no qualifications was rife.

Chris and his wife were 17 when they had their first child; at least two of their children now have their own children and are teenage mums, and at least one of them now has a social care team assessing her ability to parent.

Wendy's mother had had her very young; Wendy had her first child at 17, and her son had his first child at 15. Wendy's mother had given her to her grandparents to live with as she was not ready to have a child. When they were unable to look after her, she ended up in care. In turn social services were involved with Wendy's daughter, Hannah, from the age of 12. Hannah has a child, Logan, who lives with Wendy.

It is commonly accepted and evidenced that parents and families are the biggest single influence on children's lives and will to a greater or lesser extent determine their significant relationships as they grow up – and the ways in which those children go on to parent their own children. The key problem for these families is that the influence of their families is negative not positive and therefore breaking any cycle is almost impossible.

As Kim, a mum who had endured horrific violence from the father of her children and been a very heavy drinker, said: *'I grew up in care. My dad's a bit of an alcoholic. The reason I went into care was through violence, but my mum left us, so we went into care'*.

Another mother talked about how she had neglected her own children, and then went on to say that her eldest daughter had become a teenage mother who had to have her children taken away due to neglect and inappropriate sexual relationships.

### ***Large numbers of children***

Many of the families we interviewed had large numbers of children. 8 families (half of those we interviewed) had four or more children – whereas in the general population it is unusual to have four or more (only 4% of the population do so<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> Labour Force Survey (2011), Office for National Statistics

The sheer presence of more children added to their stresses and made parenting more difficult; making it harder to cope. This can increase the chance of risk to the children in families where there are significant problems already.

Many of the parents were little more than children themselves when they started having children, and came from troubled backgrounds where their experience of being parented was, in many cases, extremely poor. So they had little to go on when they became parents themselves, and were struggling to cope even when they had fewer children.

Some of the families reported being able to cope with the children when they were younger but as they got older found it more difficult, as they often started to display more challenging behaviour – often borne of their early experiences.

When asked about why they had had so many children, there was also a strong sense of pregnancies ‘just happening’ as if it was not in their control to prevent them occurring.

But there was also a sense of people hoping that the next child might cancel out the problems of the previous one, or that it would be ‘alright this time’.

*“You’re not supposed to bring another life into the world when your world is falling down around you, but you think it’s going to be better each time...you do it for yourself...I think I’ll never get over the fact that I feel like I let my own children down. I messed my children up just as much, and I think that’s because basically I couldn’t cope with what had happened.” Kim*

Families also said that a new baby often came from a new relationship where they had thought it would work that time – although this was often not the case.

Other work reviewing serious case reviews, stated that social workers also looked on having another child as a sign of a ‘fresh start’ – what they call the ‘start again syndrome’, perhaps after having a child taken into care, or difficulties with parenting<sup>2</sup>.

One mother, observed at family court proceedings during the writing of this report, had twelve children and said she kept getting pregnant to “*get over losing the previous one to care*”. She had not been able to keep any of her children due to her drug addiction.

### ***Shifting family make-up***

Many families we spoke to were extended networks of half siblings and step

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<sup>2</sup> Brandon, M., et al. (2008) Analysing Child Deaths and Serious Injury through Abuse and Neglect: What can we learn? *A Biennial Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2003-05*.

siblings; mothers had taken on step children, some of whom had children of their own; biological fathers were absent; new boyfriends came and went; some children grew up in and out of care.

Extended family networks, traditionally viewed in society as positive influencers, in these cases tended to be characterised by instability and chaos, with new arrivals often being frightening and bringing trouble with them, or affecting existing stable relationships.

Some of the new additions and changes only seemed to exacerbate the problems a family had. For example children from previous relationships were cited as causing problems – sometimes because it meant mixing teenage children from previous fathers with small children from new relationships. Other times it was about violence from the previous relationships spilling into the new ones.

In some cases there are clearly negative consequences for children growing up in these structurally unstable families, especially where the instability is accompanied by violence. As one interviewee described it the children grew up 'seeing hell'. One mother reported that her son slept with a knife under his pillow for fear of his stepfather.

The majority of the families described absent biological fathers and fathers taking a very casual approach to parenthood and relationships. For example, as soon as the relationship between the parents breaks down, the father disappears from the family never to be heard of again.

Commonly, the women also described short casual relationships which lead to pregnancy and a child, after which the fathers are rarely around.

### ***Dysfunctional relationships***

Linked to shifting family structures is a broader set of often dysfunctional relationships – between parents themselves; between them and their children, with their friends and extended family, and even the relationship with professionals assigned to them. Many of the people interviewed were just not very good at relationships – unsurprising perhaps in light of their own upbringings.

Their inability to form effective and positive relationships was often pivotal and played out across their lives with regard to their relationship with their partners, as parents, with their neighbours, friends and associates – and indeed with the myriad of agencies and services that work with them.

All of those interviewed had struggled in one way or another to bring up some or all of their children. Some of those interviewed thought that they had tried their best even though many seemed aware that they had not done a good job. There were many examples of the mothers recognising how that they had not given their children a good start in life, given their own background.

*“People just don’t realise what messes things [up], and I’d also say that I messed up my children just as much, and I think that’s because I basically couldn’t cope with what had happened...” Kim*

*“Like I really haven’t had a mum, she didn’t have one. You know but my mum’s mum left, I sometimes think to myself I’d have been better off if my mum had of gone, you know what I mean, because I’ve had a mum there and she’s taught me so many bad things...” Bethany*

The influence of male partners was often negative. Melissa’s long-term partner was in prison and persuaded her to smuggle drugs in, for which she received a custodial sentence. The father of Bethany’s children is a heroin addict – which leads to her too becoming addicted and her children at risk of being taken from her. In at least two cases, the biological father denied any responsibility for the child, leading to paternity tests.

Most of the women we spoke to had had a series of very difficult relationships, which seemed to repeat themselves. The majority involved domestic violence.

*“I’d been in and out of relationships, tonnes of relationships with loads of knob heads basically. Just different disguises, different mannerisms, drug addicts, alcohol addicts, gambling addicts, if there was an addict I seemed to attract them. I think because my self-esteem was so low I thought that’s all I deserve...” Karen*

Many of those interviewed also struggled to parent their children effectively. The majority of mothers had brought up their children alone, although all had had partners in their homes at some point. The women described how the presence of partners often hindered child rearing rather than help ease the burden. In some cases the mothers seemed scarcely to understand that they were the ‘responsible’ adult in their household. Some gave their children back to their own parents to look after, or they treated their children like they were living with friends. In other cases the children ended up trying to be the responsible one in the household – or had simply ended up taking over the home instead. In some cases the mother’s idea of protecting their children seemed extremely far away from what most would consider acceptable.

*“Yeah so Owen left and then I think Clare must have been probably the age of going up to secondary school herself and she was fine in her first year. She got to 12 and I don’t know what happened. She changed completely. Horrible child...she basically took over the house...” Jill*

Kim allowed some of her younger children to live with her ex-partner so that he would keep away from her and her older children – all of whom he had been violent with.

Stella talked about her daughter Becky as more of a friend than a daughter:

*“At this point I had to deal with the death of their dad knowing that I was going to be homeless any time soon, my son is starting to go off the rails, the only*

*thing that was keeping me sane was Becky, she has always kept me sane do you know what I mean? Even to this day, she is her dad."*

### ***The anti-social family and friends network***

Unsurprisingly perhaps, those we interviewed move in social networks of people who share similar backgrounds, problems and characteristics. Very often that was extended family rather than friends. Of course while those who suffered domestic violence did not actively choose violent partners, they may be used to, vulnerable to, or not surprised by violence in partners.

Neighbours, friends or extended family who live close to but not necessarily in same household as the family exert a strong influence over its culture. One woman who described asking for help over the behaviour of her son was told "just smack your kids", and another's mother told her to put her kids in care.

In some instances the family's vulnerability and their own behaviour makes them not just perpetrators of anti-social behaviour but also targets, and properties can become an 'open house' for drug users and other criminal or anti-social behaviour. Lindsey talked about her 'so-called' friends who took advantage of her and her 'good nature':

*"I was a bit lonely; I think it was more vulnerability than loneliness and wanting someone around to talk to and that. But they did like pressure me quite a lot and intimidate me and bully me a lot and say, well if you don't do this, we are going to do this..."*

The impression of families' isolation from more 'normal' or positive friends or networks came across strongly. While many families moved around from one place to another fleeing violence, others had never left the area they had grown up in. Their partners came from the same street or moved between women in the area. They tended to stick within a network of other dysfunctional peers.

However, it would be wrong to characterise what is happening in these families as problems that are hidden behind closed doors. Their problems often spill out into the street and are played out in public, and have a significant impact on the people who live around them. One mother described being out at the shops and people asking her to leave because of the bad behaviour of her children. Another family talked of the noise of having so many children in one house where the norm was for everyone to shout at each other.

Many families talk about their neighbours not being co-operative with them or not complaining about their behaviour directly to them. Understandably though, from the local neighbour's perspective they would be wary about cultivating friendships or challenging their behaviour face-to-face, especially when witness to their anti-social behaviour, violence and crime.

Families also have dysfunctional relationship with the organisations that exist to help them and protect their children. Many of the families complained about professionals or agencies involved with them, and in particular, social services. However it would not be fair to always lay the blame there when looked at dispassionately. Undoubtedly, some families have reason to feel let down. But there were often unwarranted feelings that their problems were not of their making, and that they had no control over the problem or its solution; that it was they that had highlighted problems, with services simply failing to intervene and do what they were entitled to expect of them.

Several families talked of needing a bigger house from the council as a cause of problems for them, or of not getting enough free childcare, or they blamed teachers and schools for failing their children – when it was clear that their troubles were arising from their home life. Families sometimes blamed social services for taking their children away or threatening them with doing so, but others complained that they wouldn't take them when they felt they couldn't cope.

Many admitted that where agencies did try to get involved to ascertain the state of family life, they would deflect those inquiries – often from worry about their children being taken away, but also to hide drug abuse, an abusive relationship, or simply from defensiveness against accusations that they could not cope. Many simply refused to co-operate with services.

*“...because I used to blag people... tell everyone what they wanted hear and then they'd go and I'd carry on doing my stuff... my gear, get on with my life and that were it.”* Bethany

Others clearly didn't accept the gravity of their situation, and lied to professionals: *“...I've been a bit in denial. I felt like I was coping. Obviously I wasn't but in my reality I were coping alright. And I didn't want people poking their noses into my life.”* Nicole

Some actively refused any help: *“Yes, and I think it just got to the point with me where I just completely broke down, I was freezing everybody out, didn't want to know and it was like, can't you just all get out my hair, get out my life, I don't want to know and I just like froze.”* Lindsey

In many cases it seemed it was only when their backs were against the wall – with threats from social services, the issuing of child protection proceedings or eviction notices – that they took help to get themselves sorted out.

*“...basically I got told I had to comply there was no 'you can think about it', it was 'you have to do this or you're evicted'.”* Kim

*“I thought I can't go on like this. I needed a shake...and sometimes you do need that, and just because you need help doesn't mean you're no less than anybody else.”* Kim

*“And then it got to the point, this particular day, for some strange reason things just snapped and just clicked into place and it was like I am going to do*

*this, I am going to have to tackle things head on and let [the Family Intervention Project] in and let social care get involved, let them get involved with me and the kids and I am going to have to work with them and I thought the quicker I work with them, I thought the quicker I can get them off my back and I can start living my life.” Lindsey*

## **Abuse**

The prevalence of child sexual and physical abuse was striking and shocking. It became clear that in many of these families the abuse of children by parents, siblings, half siblings and extended family and friends was often a factor in their dysfunction.

Some discussed it as if as it was almost expected and just a part of what they had experienced in life. Others were all too aware of how tragic and damaging its consequences could be, and talked extensively about the injustice of their sufferings as children.

What was clear is that children often had not been protected by their parents. In many of the families the sexual abuse repeated itself in the next generation; not necessarily by the abused as perpetrator (particularly if the abused was female), but by others in or around the family. There were also incidents where families talked about incest.

*“I was sexually abused by my dad, I was beaten by my dad, emotionally abused by my dad, made to feel that I was stupid, I was worthless, not even worth breathing oxygen or nothing.” Stella*

*“I had a few problems growing up...I was raped at 4...my half brother did it...My grandma’s boyfriend raped my mother from the age of 4 to 18 and then when she was 18 she got caught pregnant.” Nicole*

*“I was abused by our next door neighbour, I was only like living with my mum about three weeks when it started, and it didn’t end until I was eleven, when I told my mum. And then I went into foster care, because I didn’t want to live with her.” Jill*

*“I was 7 years old when my dad started sexually abusing me and I think my sister was the same age, because I know he started with her before me. But the beatings, you could guarantee every single day right, I would either get told that I looked like a man, or I would get told I am an ugly bastard or I would get told that I should just die and get it over with, or I just got looks all the time you know. Or they would find something to beat me with...” Stella*

Several of the women interviewed told us that they had been abused as children and that as they got older, they had gone on to experience violence from their partners. There was a sense that being from or exposed to abuse in families meant that their vulnerability to new relationships that also turn out

to be abusive is greater. There is a large body of evidence that shows that experience of abuse in childhood is strongly linked experiences in later life.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Institutional care***

With such high levels of childhood abuse in families it is unsurprising the large number of families that had experienced children going into care. Often parents who were placed in care as children went on to have children who also experienced care. Nearly all families talked about the authorities having 'child protection concerns' about their children.

For many of the parents, 'social services' had been an ongoing presence in their lives. Interestingly, some families did not mention care or the involvement of social services in their lives until prompted; almost as if it were so normal it was not worth mentioning. There was no sense from the families that the presence of social services in their lives was unnecessary.

For a few, being in care or in foster placements came as a relief.

*"And I got put into care at 15 years old, and I have to say, it's the best place I ever lived at the kids home. I loved it...I was able to walk home from school for the first time and not think what's going to happen today..."* Stella

*"...they were the best two years [time in foster care]...Like you know I can remember everything about living with them. Like my birthdays, Christmases that I had with them, everything and I can't really remember any of the others."* Jill

Although some talked of further abuse in foster care:

*"In my file it says she didn't want me from birth. The school noticed the neglect. I remember being in hospital one time and people taking photos of me. They might have prosecuted her I don't know. I went to a foster family started acting up, moved...moved lots of times. Then one family the brother and father sexually abused me for two years..."* Donna

Many were in and out of care from early childhood. It is difficult to disentangle which problems resulted from what happened at home and the impact of time in care. In addition, there was always an ongoing relationship or contact with the family. Sometimes, this was positive – but more than often it was not. There was a strong sense of being in constant flux – moving in and out of being fostered, temporary care, back to parents without a sense of resolution

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Whitfield, C. et al., (2003). "Violent Childhood Experiences and the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence as Adults". *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, and Messman-Moore, Terri L.; Long, Patricia J. (2000). "Child Sexual Abuse and Revictimization in the Form of Adult Sexual Abuse, Adult Physical Abuse, and Adult Psychological Maltreatment". *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*

or permanency. Only rarely did children seem to be adopted from an early age.

And even if there were serious enough problems identified for a child to be removed from their parents, few talked of being offered any professional help to come to terms with what had been occurring. Stella identified how she had carried problems from her childhood into adulthood, and what would have helped:

*“The only problem with children’s homes, that I didn’t see back then that I see now, was that I had no help with the abuse, I had no help with nothing. No counsellor or nothing, I was just left to deal with my life. Because there’s this thing that people seem to think that once a child is taken away from abuse, they are okay. They are not, it sticks with them. And they grow into adulthood with all this going on.”*

Some returned to live with parents from whom they had been removed. In one case, a young woman sought out her mother after spending several years in foster care and then moved back to live with her, taking her young baby. In this case the mother who had been unable to care for her own child then tried to care for her grandchild – without success.

There is national research which shows how damaging this cycle of moving in and out of care can be. For example, around half of children who entered care as a result of abuse or neglect suffer further harm if they return home<sup>4</sup>. What also became clear was that there did not seem to be any intervention or help given to the parents after the child had been taken into care, to look at causes. So when left with the next child on its way, or step children entering the household, or grandchildren left with them by their own daughters, nothing in their behaviour or ability to parent had changed.

### **Teenage mothers**

Children in care or leaving care have repeatedly been shown to be at higher risk of teenage pregnancy. One survey showed that a quarter of care leavers had a child by the age of sixteen and nearly half were mothers within eighteen to twenty four months after leaving care<sup>5</sup>. From the interviews with many families a pattern emerged that concurred with this research.

Many families were larger than average, complex, and often dysfunctional. Abuse was prevalent which meant higher incidents of care. That in turn seemed to link in many cases with teenage pregnancy. Of those mothers we

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<sup>4</sup> Farmer, E., et al., (2008) *The Reunification of Looked After Children with their Parents: Patterns, interventions and outcomes*, Report to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, found that 46% of for children who entered care as a result of abuse or neglect suffered further abuse or neglect if they returned home. DCSF research report (2010) *Case management and outcomes for neglected children returned to their parents: A five year follow-up study* found that 60% of neglected children suffer further neglect when they returned home.

<sup>5</sup> N Biehal et al, (1995) *Moving On*, National Children’s Bureau,

interviewed, ten out of the sixteen were under eighteen and thirteen out of the sixteen were under twenty when they had their first child. The daughter of a teenage mother is one and a half times more likely to become one herself than the daughter of an older mother<sup>6</sup>.

From our interviews what was clear was that having a child that young, particularly alongside other problems such as an abusive and violent family background, meant the child was born when many of the mothers were not ready or able to cope with the responsibility, particularly given their own upbringing.

Amy, daughter of Stella, also a teenage mother, had her first child, Mason, at the age of 15. After her son was born she went out partying "*...the police would bring Amy back wrecked out of her head in the middle of the night while she had her son asleep in her bedroom.*" Two years later Amy had another child, Layla. They have now been taken into care due to child neglect.

An inability to cope with motherhood often meant the child would be looked after by the grandmother who was often a young woman herself. This added to the complexity of the family set up as many of these women were still struggling with other teenage children who were themselves getting into trouble.

Wendy's daughter had her first child, Logan, at 15 but it is her mother who has looked after him. *'I've had Logan all his life...but she walked out on Logan, Logan was eight months old...she started hanging around with people involved with drugs and they were more important than Logan...and then she came home one day and she was off her face on drugs and drinking...and I said...I'll take Logan or I'll get in touch with social services...and she turned and walked out the door.'*

## **Violence**

Violence was also a major problem identified by the families. The violence often seemed all-pervading – between parents, between parents and child, between extended family, between siblings and spilling out on the street and into the classroom. Close to three quarters of those interviewed were families where the mother had suffered domestic abuse, and in some cases with daughters who then went on to suffer violence with their own partners. Violence was a reason for entering care, for moving house, for escaping partners.

In the majority of cases, violence within the family was multi-generational – the violence experienced or witnessed when growing up usually meant violence continued in the next generation.

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<sup>6</sup> K Kiernan (1995) *Transition to Parenthood: Young mothers, young fathers – associated factors and later life experiences*, Welfare State Programme, Discussion paper. LSE.

*"I tried leaving him by myself without no help or support from my family and that, and he decided to shove me down the stairs when I was five and a half months pregnant with Luke, but luckily I didn't miscarry or lose him or anything. That like pushed me over the edge and I thought, right, I have got to get away."* From this Lindsey went on to enter an even more violent relationship, and had to run from that one too.

*"He'd come home and smash the flat up and hit me...and I found out I was pregnant...and then we got back together when I was eight months pregnant because I thought well I've got to give it a go for the baby's sake. And so we got back together and he tried to strangle me one night when I was asleep."* Jill

*"The last time that my dad were at home I were 5 and I got covered in me mum's blood where me dad battered her, that were last childhood memory I have of my dad being there."* Melissa

Bethany said of her mother, *"she was such a nasty cow, no wonder people hit her"*. Bethany grew up with violence perpetrated by boyfriends of her mother and her mother on the boyfriends. Bethany later entered a violent relationship with her partner, culminating in her stabbing him.

*"I'd ended up stabbing my fella and I'm not a violent person at all...all I'd ever seen was my mum and her boyfriends fighting, I thought to myself there's no way on earth I'm going to have a bloke kicking me about the house. So I just started hitting him...as soon as an argument erupted I'd ram something at him and stuff...you know run out the house, anything to stop him from hurting me like my mum used to get hurt."*

Bethany later also talks about the stabbing almost as if it were part of a normal row between partners: *"I said to him you'd best not come down now because I've just stabbed you, I think we should have some time apart..."*

In many cases mothers used violence on their children to discipline them and the way some families talked about it, violence seemed almost normal behaviour.

*"I was disciplining them all wrong, rather than grounding them and taking things off them, I was lashing out and smacking them and things like that."* Lindsey

*"One of the lads was playing up at night time and I lost it and I actually smacked him about ten times, I won't say really hard but quite hard before I realised what I was doing and I told them [children's services] and it went in one ear and straight out the other..."* Susie

*"And I actually threw something and it caught and it gave her a bruise on her legs, so I actually took her into social services myself and said that I had done it."* Wendy

Kim tells of removing doors because her children were so scared of what could be behind them and Karen tells of her son's fear over her ex-partner's violence:

*"...he slept with a knife under his pillow...And what it was is, he was scared that my daughter's dad would come and kill us all, so he was the protector..."*

But Karen also talks of her sons' extreme violence towards each other and to her, culminating in what she describes as them 'stamping on my head'.

*"Two o'clock one morning Jack decided, I had a big black eye and everything, he decided to punch me and I don't remember much apart from the police coming in."* She would often call the police to remove the boys from the house.

Recent research indicates that witnessing domestic violence as a child results in males being more likely to engage in domestic violence as adults, and in females being more likely to be victims as adults. Children who witness family violence are four times more likely to carry a weapon or seriously harm someone, three times more likely to be involved in anti-social behaviour and twice as likely to be excluded from school<sup>7</sup>.

### **Early signs of poor behaviour**

At least one child in every family tended to have what is termed 'behavioural difficulties' – and very often it was more than one child. For many, their behaviour started to get more and more difficult to manage from around 9 years old and upwards, and in particular from the onset of adolescence.

This behaviour played out both at home and at school. Some parents also mentioned their own behavioural problems at school. Many families focused on one child as the one who was the 'difficult' one. Very often this child was the starting point for their story, their explanation for how problems in the family started, even though as the interview developed it was clear that this was neither the only problem nor the starting point of other problems.

*"I knew there was something wrong with him going through infant school and I tried saying there was, except nobody picked up on it and found out he was dyslexic and had learning difficulties...When they moved his schools he got involved with some boys...got him sniffing aerosol cans and petrol, and god knows what else."* Wendy

*"I noticed Sam, I would say from about 4 or 5, something not right with him. We had the other two, going through school no problems whatsoever...I made an appointment and I said, 'Can you just check him out for something,' and*

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<sup>7</sup> NSPCC (2011) *Prevalence and incidence of child abuse and neglect*

*she says, 'What do you mean?' and I goes, 'Well, I'm getting this at school, he's done this, he's thrown berries at parents, kicking the walls in, all different things...Set fires at school...' Still they kept saying there was nothing wrong with him."* Angela and Carl

Although Angela says that everything was fine until her third child was born, this was clearly not the case as the story unfolded – with ongoing violence between the parents.

Similarly Stella says neither she nor her children had ever got into trouble until her 4 year old son started climbing out of windows. Again it was clear that their problems were not limited to this. Karen talked about her second son being the difficult one from birth – whereas domestic violence and other problems were clearly apparent from early on.

This is a theme picked up in academic research; *"...a recurring pattern in the families' narrative was a tendency to identify one family member as posing particular problems...However the full extent of need was evident in the interviews and the needs went beyond the specific family member..."*<sup>8</sup>

In some cases, it was clear that there were specific problems with one or other of the children. ADHD was raised several times by mothers who noticed their child did not behave like the other children, and they subsequently spent long periods trying to get them a diagnosis, as an explanation and perhaps a way to manage their behaviour.

*"It was concluded he's got ADHD [aged 12]. And I thought I've been fighting [to find out what was wrong with him] since he's been about 5 years old..."* Karen

*"Teachers still kept staying 'no he's fine, he's fine' I thought 'He's not bloody well fine, I know he's not'."* Angela and Carl

For many parents this was described as a key time, when they said they could not cope with the child's bad behaviour. Often the parent talked about not knowing how to control the child's behaviour, and it was at this stage that families most regularly said they asked for help with their children from professionals – although most did not seem to get it. In some cases the parent even recognised their own behaviour (for example hitting the child, or neglecting a baby) as detrimental and sought help.

*"...So I would get called in a few times then it would end up where she'd stop going into school, but she'd get Becky [her sister] to stop going into school as well because they were both in the same school...But even though I was having all these problems with Amy right, and I did ask for help, I didn't get any, no help at all. I spoke to the school about what she was like at home and I said to the school the way she is at school is the way she is at home. "*

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<sup>8</sup> Morris, K (2012) *Troubled Families: Their Experiences of Using Multiple Services*.

*“[The school said,] ‘We’ll have to exclude him. Cooling off period.’ Cooling off period for you yes but not for us. He’d smash our doors, kick things.” Stella*

The challenges of managing difficult behaviour can be compounded by a single parent trying to do so alone, often living in a very chaotic household and who may not have been parented well themselves.

Many parents had believed that ‘there was something wrong’ with their child, and did not associate their own problems and their own conduct often in front of their children with the child’s subsequent behaviour.

*“Isaac, right I didn’t know was on cannabis, but a couple of months ago got caught at school with a ten bag of cannabis on him... Basically, people would turn around to me and say because I smoke cannabis Amy smokes it because of me, it isn’t. Amy smokes it because of the people that she went around with... Amy was 15 years old, if it was me right, bearing in mind I have been smoking cannabis since Isaac was 2, Amy would have been on cannabis a lot longer before that if it was me.” Stella*

One mother described that her family intervention worker had pointed out to her, after the school had rung her and asked her to collect her son for misbehaving, that only the day before the mother had said her and her partner had been fighting in the house.

In certain cases there were undoubtedly problems with children that any parent would find difficult to deal with. But for many it was clear that the reasons for that behaviour had come from the household itself – the poor parenting skills, the constant changes in the home, family and partners, and the ongoing verbal and physical violence (among many other factors no doubt).

*“...my kids mean the world to me, even though I’ve put them through a lot of shit that I know is going to affect them for the rest of [their] life...” Bethany*

## **School**

Nearly every family we met had experienced difficulty with their child in school. In the same way that parents struggled to cope with their child’s behaviour, unsurprisingly very often so did the mainstream schools.

*“I told the head teacher I expected it at home so they should expect it at school...they wouldn’t give him a chance...” Helen*

Many members of families did not complete school or attend it regularly – often a trait that seemed to pass from parent to child. When children were excluded, they did not seem to get replacement full-time education. Parents described their children being sent to sit in corridors, or on lunchtime exclusion and permanent exclusion where they are free to wander around the streets. And as their account of their child’s school career unfolds, in many

cases they end up in a pupil referral unit, being home tutored, or not in education at all.

What was remarkable was how little most children attended any learning institution at all after they were excluded from their secondary school. A few hours a week was all that was expected of some of these children.

Wendy's son Ryan, when finally diagnosed with learning difficulties and dyslexia, was given additional one-to-one tuition but was soon expelled from school. Then he got two hours a week home tuition for six months, and then went to a special school, where he continued with bad behaviour. The mother was fined twice for Ryan failing to go to school. Following the intervention of the intensive family project, he now attends an alternative education establishment, but this amounts to attendance only one day a week.

It is an irony that some of the children did not want to be in school, and that the way to stop being in school is to misbehave – which the children did almost effortlessly.

What is important here is not only that the parents very often can't stop poor behaviour on their own by this stage, and being excluded does nothing to address this, but that the wider community also suffers the consequences of these children not being in school. The families understood the consequences of the children having too much time on their hands. Many struggled with this and often blamed others for not helping them. But nevertheless they made the link to a slide into anti-social behaviour, crime, drugs and alcohol.

The MORI Youth Survey April 2002, commissioned by the Youth Justice Board, asked children whether they had committed an offence in the last 12 months. 64% of excluded children said they had, compared with 26% of school pupils. A study of an outer London borough showed that 71% of persistent young offenders had either been excluded from school or been persistently absent for long periods<sup>9</sup>.

Another report found that excluded children commit up to 50% more offences in the year after exclusion, than in the year leading up to it<sup>10</sup>. The same report quotes Home Office research findings which suggest that truants are three times more likely to commit crimes than non-truants.

### ***Anti-social behaviour***

Many of the families interviewed were sourced from some of the original Family Intervention Projects set up in 2006 that specialised in dealing with families who were perpetrators of anti-social behaviour. So it is unsurprising that we found that the families were involved not only in violence within the family described earlier in this report, but also with behaviour that disrupted the lives of those who lived alongside them. However as other studies show,

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<sup>9</sup> NACRO (2002) *Persistent young offenders: Research on individual backgrounds and life experiences*

<sup>10</sup> NACRO (2000) *Learning the Lessons*

families with such high levels of chaos and violence within are more likely to have that behaviour spill out to affect to others in their community.

Almost three quarters of the families interviewed mentioned someone including themselves, their children or partners who had been clearly sanctioned or brought to the attention of the police for anti-social behaviour or crime.

Some reported that they called police to resolve problems in their home, or relied on their neighbours to call the police or intervene at points when violence threatened or flared in the house:

*“But what I used to do is knock on my neighbours and actually say to them, ‘Phone the police, if you can hear me screaming phone the police, I’m not going to take offence’.”* Karen

For others, there were assaults and attacks on them and then reciprocal violence and anti-social behaviour:

*“We had a social worker as well at the time, we were having our door kicked in by kids on the street whilst she was trying to talk to us inside...and it’s like ‘this is what we’re living in, it’s not just in the house, it’s out of the house’...I think she was terrified in the house, I think she thought they were going to smash in the door and beat everybody up and I was like ‘this is a daily occurrence’.”* Karen

Some families clearly had children who were causing havoc in the neighbourhood and must have been terrifying for neighbours to live near.

*“They used to terrorise the neighbours...and when the council sent us a letter asking us to go in we didn’t even know what our kids had been up to. We just thought they were normal children and every time we came in we used to ask them what they’d been up to...Apart from that you get branded when you go out on the streets. People look at you when you go shopping, ‘can’t you keep your kids under control?’ Yes, I’ve been asked to leave a store with my kids. It’s ridiculous because I need to go and do some shopping.”* Donna & Jake

But it was also often the case that families would say that their children were never the ringleaders, and that they were always led astray by others – they seemed to ‘get in with a bad crowd’. One mother, when challenged about this, went on to readily admit that perhaps her sons were responsible for bad behaviour in the area.

*“Sam got mixed up with a gang last year as well...he doesn’t see the danger – with ADHD you don’t. He was caught on the Co-op roof because they’ll say do it and he’ll say how high?...he’s no angel don’t get me wrong.”* Angela & Carl

It was often the threat of eviction from their property due to their family’s anti-social behaviour that would become the spur to try and get the behaviour under control and work with a Family Intervention Project.

*“...because you are right there smack in the middle, you don’t really see it. In the end you don’t see...you see yourself as the victim. We lived next door to ASBO children, then mine became worse than them...a few years earlier I would have been mortified.” Kim*

### **Mental health – depression**

It is somewhat uninformative to say many of these families suffer mental health problems, even if you more specifically say many suffer depression or anxiety as a result of their problems. What does emerge from these interviews is an understanding of how mental health problems were likely to have come about, either described by the interviewee, or what could be interpreted as a response to a very difficult life. Some were able to pinpoint a particular event that caused mental health problems. For example, one interviewee said being raped led to a suicide attempt, and another said childhood sexual and physical abuse led to a suicide attempt as well as depression and very violent thoughts towards men. Many spoke of suffering depression more generally, and post-natal depression in particular. While this could have arisen as they struggled to cope with becoming teenage mums, it is possible that pre-existing depression was only recognised at this point in their lives and labelled as ‘post-natal’. Given the traumatic lives many had experienced, it is clear they could well have had pre-existing mental health problems that had gone unnoticed.

Depression impeded their ability to function. There was a lot of talk of tiredness, not being able to cope, being overwhelmed by circumstances and ‘giving up’.

Jill said she became depressed after her marriage broke down and stopped looking after herself, or her children. She could see it was all going wrong but couldn’t do anything about it:

*“I was very depressed, I hadn’t been out of the house for nearly two years. I wasn’t washing, I wasn’t keeping myself clean, nothing...I slept in bed all day and got up when Leah came home from school, and then just basically lay on the sofa.” Jill*

*“When I found out I was pregnant, I got told that I can’t live there [foster care] and I have got to find somewhere to live. I was going to college...at the time, I had left catering college, two weeks before the exam I got a depression, and I had just gone off it. I just couldn’t cope with my head anymore. My dad had only got six years for what he did [sexual abuse] you know, did to me, so my head basically went.” Stella*

Families did not tend to talk about getting help for mental health problems, or indeed counselling for the trauma that many of them experienced, such as violence or rape.

## ***Drugs and alcohol***

Problems with drugs and/or alcohol were frequently cited and obviously had a huge impact upon family life. It is of course not always clear what is cause and effect – whether drinking leads to violence which then leads to drinking to cope with violence.

Drinking and drug taking seemed to be mentioned frequently with teenage mothers – either as a cause of them becoming pregnant in the first place, or later as a reason why their children were given to grandparents or taken into care.

Bethany used drugs from an early age: *“Yes. I had a social worker. Because I used to smoke a lot of weed and I think that’s why I can’t remember or I’ve blocked it out or whatever, but I vaguely remember going down to social services where I lived. I remember sitting there with my mum and my dad and they were talking and then I never saw them again. That were it, never saw them again ever, until my trouble started, well troubles with my kids, sort of thing.”*

Her drug use then worsened when she had a partner who was a heroin addict. *“So I used to have like a cap full of methadone...I used to take some of that just to be on, like, the same sort of wavelength of him...And then one day...I remember saying to him ‘I don’t want to do it anymore I feel sick, I don’t like it, I don’t want to carry on doing it’. I remember lying there, all day... and he looked at me and he just went ‘you’re going to tell me to go and get it aren’t you?’ and I said ‘yes, I can’t go for the rest of the day without it’, and that were it then, I were addicted.”*

It was also clear that these addictions cost money to fund; in one case the family had to cope with the father having a £70 a week cannabis habit. Given that debt is often a big concern for many of these families, the connection with drugs and alcohol only compounds the problems.

## **Conclusion**

It has not been the intention of this report to provide a detailed range of conclusions or recommendations about how services should deal with difficult and troubled families. The report is meant as a starting point to get a deeper understanding about who these families are and what commonalities of problem they may have – from which we can begin to go about looking at how to replicate some of the success in helping them change.

And it certainly isn't the intention to try to establish what lies behind some of the darkest aspects of social and familial problems such as violence and sexual abuse. But what can be established, and perhaps the starkest message to take from these interviews, is the extent to which the problems of these families are linked and reinforcing. They accumulate across the life course, passed on from parents to their children across generations of the same family.

So this means that the traditional approach of services reaching individual family members, at crisis point or after, and trying to fix single issues such as 'drug use', 'non-attendance at school' or 'domestic violence' in these families is most often destined to fail. Their behaviours and problems can be properly understood only by looking at the full cycle - and the full family. This requires services who work with families to take the long view; of what happened to the parents as children and of what has happened to the children since birth. This may not be a pretty sight, and will lay bare the extent of the dysfunction that is accumulated in the lives of some of these families.

And at the most fundamental level is an absence of basic family functioning which must be restored (or created for the first time) if these families are to really change.

But these families are not beyond help and hope. Indeed, the majority of the families detailed here have already made huge leaps forward in putting an end to the deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour that have plagued them and their family - and the remainder are making smaller but nonetheless significant steps toward tackling their problems.

This is a testimony to the skill, determination and tenacity of the family intervention workers and others supporting these families. The next part of the challenge will be to understand more about how the success with families is achieved, and then to seek to widen this approach to a far larger group of families across the country; to reshape, redesign and refocus services. The stories laid out here are a compelling argument for the urgency of this programme of work.

## ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to pass on a huge thank you to the six local authorities and their Family Intervention Projects and other services that enabled me to interview families. Their willingness to allow me to put their work under such scrutiny was hugely appreciated. Particular thank you must also go to the incredible family intervention workers who every day strive to help families in practical, compassionate and determined ways. It's a job I know I couldn't do. The case studies could have contained much more detail about the successful work that has been done with the families and how they are all, with the help of these workers, turning a corner in their lives – the families themselves all acknowledged it would not have been possible without the workers from the Family Intervention Projects. I would like to name them all individually but preserving the anonymity of the families makes this impossible.

And finally I'd like to thank the families. I am indebted to them for their openness in recounting to me often painful and distressing details of their personal histories and wish them every success as they continue on the road to changing their lives.

*Louise Casey*

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