



Developing a Family Test

Views from the Family and Parenting Institute
August 2011

Executive Summary

“From here on I want a family test applied to all domestic policy. If it hurts families, if it undermines commitment, if it tramples over the values that keeps people together, or stops families from being together, then we shouldn’t do it.”

- Prime Minister, David Cameron 15 August 2011¹

The Family and Parenting Institute warmly welcomes the idea raised in the Prime Minister’s recent speech of family-proofing domestic policies. It represents a great opportunity for a renewed emphasis on progress towards the Prime Minister’s aspiration of the most “family-friendly government” ever.

In this paper we argue that a Family Test on new policies would be a positive development, provided that this was more than an additional bureaucratic burden (‘another form to fill out’) and contributed to a more significant cultural shift among policy makers about the importance of families to the economy and society.

We urge that the development of a Family Test should focus on the intended outcomes and not just the process and we propose six stages to developing this approach. Ultimately, we believe the most important Family Test is whether families themselves have, and feel they have, had their lives improved and whether we now live in a more family friendly society. We here propose steps to ensure that UK policy making passes this test now and into the future.

Table 1: Six stages for developing a Family Test



¹ David Cameron’s Speech 15 August 2011 <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots/>

Introduction

'Family policy' does not only mean policymaking which is specifically aimed at children and parents; the consequences of a diverse range of policy decisions across the spectrum (from housing to transport) will be felt by families and children. For many years, FPI has argued that supporting families requires an analysis of a range of cross-cutting policy areas that have an impact on the wellbeing of families and their ability to parent effectively. For example, this was raised by delegates from the family sector at our Family Policy Conference in both 2010 and 2011:

The Government should do impact assessments for different types and generations of families as part of its planning for spending cuts. These assessments should be generally available so that a proper evaluation of repercussions for families can be made²

Over the coming year, the Government and the voluntary sector have a joint role to play in examining closely the implementation of a host of new policy initiatives, to identify how families might be adversely affected. This is particularly important in the context of the forthcoming Welfare Reform Bill. The Children and Families Taskforce could also play a key role in auditing and addressing the (intended and unintended) effects of forthcoming policy proposals on families across all Government departments.³

The need for a family test derives from policies that can produce unintended consequences for families or work counter to other initiatives which aim to support family life. An example of this includes the risk of disrupting family life through changes in Local Housing Allowance, the level of the benefit cap, and the potential that some changes to benefits could inadvertently introduce new disincentives to seek work. In this example, somewhere between the intersection of various policies from the Departments for Work and Pensions, Communities and Local Government, and Education, there is a potential risk of undermining of the overall intended objectives of the vision of a family friendly society.

So, if properly implemented, we would regard a family test on new policies as helping to integrate family policy across Government departments to understand what they mean in the round for families. This is an approach which is already gaining traction elsewhere:

Evidence has shown that family proofing is gaining acceptance in a number of countries, many of which have realised that economic and social impact assessments alone are insufficient to aid the future sustainable development and wellbeing of their respective societies⁴

We now offer six stages that we believe would help develop a Family Test.

² FPI Family Policy Conference Report 2010 http://www.familyandparenting.org/our_work/Policy-and-Public-Affairs/Family+Policy+Conference

³ FPI Family Conference Report 2011

http://www.familyandparenting.org/Resources/FPI/Documents/Policy%20conference%202011_final.pdf

⁴ Relationships Foundation (2010) Family Proofing Policy: A Review of International Experience of Family Impact Assessment

1. Start with a view about what a family friendly society looks like

We believe that a family test needs to be developed with the ultimate outcomes of a ‘family friendly’ society in mind. Without this, it is likely that any approach will be plagued by inconsistent understanding of why families matter and which policy areas need to be assessed. We should ask ourselves the question – what specific outcomes are we are seeking to achieve in building a family friendly society.

Having some consensus about intended outcomes would enable policymakers to assess the intended effect of new policies but also provide a framework to analyse the collective effect of a range of existing policies on the ultimate outcomes that the Government wish to pursue. Measures could then be developed that help identify how overall policy is changing over time as well as how each individual policy is making a contribution.

As a starting point, we would propose the following four fundamental prerequisites of a family friendly society⁵:

- **A fairer society for families** – where economic conditions support family wellbeing, bringing up children and the reduction of poverty for families
- **Family friendly business and working life** – where employers and work-life balance supports the wellbeing of families and parents
- **Essential service provision for families and children** – where there are high-quality services to support families, children and relationships, particularly in the early years of childhood
- **Family friendly infrastructure and living environment** – where communities and key services enhance the quality of life for families in their daily lives.

The test would need to assess the ability of policy to support a diverse range of families in Britain rather than a test which prescribed what a family should look like and that left people feeling judged for how they conduct their lives.

A family test must ensure that people are supported through their biggest family challenges and at key moments of stress – including parenting but also when finding schools, GPs and houses, seeking jobs that support work-life balance, asking for support with relationships or teenage children. We would want a test to recognise the specific challenges that different groups face – including for example fathers, separated parents, single parents, or parents of children with a disability.

The aim of family-proofing should absolutely be concentrated on supporting families to build strong, healthy relationships. However, this should never be seen as an alternative to ultimately protecting the needs of individuals and, in particular, children. In time, we would hope that a Family Test could also recognise a broader set of family interdependencies than just immediate households – such as caring responsibilities for elders.

We urge that a Family Test is aspirational and positive, not just focused on deficit positions and negative situations to avoid. A focus on working collectively to avoid problems is understandable, but the aim should be also to understand how positive outcomes for families can be supported. We want a family friendly society to be one in which policy-makers, families, businesses and the third sector can collectively support families to achieve great things.

⁵ Family Friendly Report Card 2011 http://www.familyandparenting.org/our_work/Families-in-the-Age-of-Austerity/Family+Friendly+Report+Card+2011/

2. Develop more than a checklist

The starting point of a Family Test is likely to consist of a checklist of questions for policymakers to consider when devising new policies. Within this there are a series of questions that could be asked under the four main prerequisites that we set out at the start – some examples are listed below but more comprehensive lists of possible questions are listed elsewhere⁶.

Table 2: Potential questions for a check-list (this list is not intended to be exhaustive)

A fairer society for families

- How does the policy impact upon a range of diverse family types?
- Does the policy strengthen economic conditions to support family wellbeing, bring up children and reduce poverty?
- How will policy support particularly vulnerable families?

Family friendly business and working life

- Does the proposal influence the role of employers to support relationships and the wellbeing of families and parents?
- Does it support the ability of families to care for each other and their children while in employment?

Essential service provision for families and children

- Will the proposal reduce accessibility to services to support families, children and relationships?
- Does it support the ability of parents and carers and to care for children?
- Will it enhance quality and effectiveness of services for key target groups?

Family friendly infrastructure and living environment

- Will the policy enhance the quality of life for families (e.g. through housing, communities, public spaces and transport)?
- Does it promote strong relationships, economic independence and parental choice?
- Does the policy enhance the ability of the third sector and voluntary sector to support families, parents and relationships?
- Does the policy ensure better coordination between other policy areas aiming to achieve better outcomes for families?

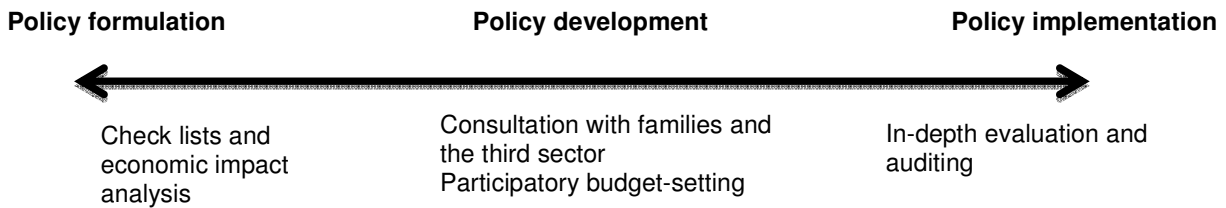
We think that there is certainly a role for this sort of check-list as a starting point that should be developed in conjunction with policy-makers, families, and organisations who support them. However, we also believe that the development of a Family Test could be made much more useful if the commitment extended beyond the development of a check-list for policymakers to a range of options at different stages of the policy process. Examining the different stages of the policy cycle leads us to ask the following questions:

- How could families and parents be invited into decision making and budget-making decisions?
- How can the voluntary and community sector be involved in the process of determining the family priorities?
- What processes could be triggered if the family proofing test is failed?

⁶ An additional and much more comprehensive list of areas to consider is contained within the excellent series of reports on “Family Proofing Policy” by the Relationships Foundation. See in particular “Towards a Conceptual Framework for Family Proofing Policy” and “A Review of International Experience of Family Impact Assessment” at <http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org>

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Table 3: Applying a Family-Test to different stages of the policy cycle



We make these points to suggest that the Family Test should be considered as a tool and an approach that could be applied at various stages of the policy cycle, not just at the start.

3. Recognise that culture and people are most important, not process

There exist already a range of Impact Assessments performed in other policy areas - from gender equality, race equality, the environment, social mobility and child poverty. A requirement to consider the impact of policies in these different areas has contributed to stronger policy-making outcomes and awareness in all these areas.

However, the extent to which any impact assessment is taken seriously is likely (like any change process) to be down to the people involved, not the process itself. In order to build emphasis on the family across a range of policy areas then we believe that the following principles will require consideration and application.

Table 4: Principles to make a success of a Family Test

- **Leadership** – high level pressure will be required from the Prime Minister and other senior Ministers to make a success of new approaches. This could be supported by the Children and Families Taskforce
- **Accountability** – appropriate accountability will ensure consistent approaches across all Government Departments, with one Department responsible for providing an overview. This could be supported by an annual independent assessment of progress
- **Transparency** – it is essential that elements of the family test are accessible and available. Outcomes of each test should be published and data that informed decisions should be made freely available
- **'Carrots and sticks'** – incentives should be designed to reward policies that are effective in relation to the Family Test and where a policy fails, this must lead to some trigger of action as a consequence
- **Development** – there will be a need to build the capacity and skills of policy makers to understand families in Britain today and support them in assessing the impact of their policies on families
- **Co-production** – the Family Test should be designed and implemented alongside families themselves and third sector and VCS organisation that support families.

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Ultimately, we believe that the success will rest on a significant cultural shift among policy makers. Family Friendly policies should be considered as a mindset and not a checklist. And as such, the process of the Family Test is one element of supporting this but not the only element. Policy makers will need to understand why they are being asked to conduct this assessment and be prepared to adapt their policy making accordingly. This requires leadership and improved understanding.

4. Improve consultation and dialogue with families

We regard a Family Test as an excellent opportunity to place families and parents at the heart of policy decisions. However, in order for this to provide real opportunities for consultation, current methods will be insufficient to engage families. We believe that work is needed to enhance the ability of policymakers to converse with families. They are led from a top-down perspective (with the starting point the questions that matter to policy-makers, not families) and are too often discussions that are entered into after decisions have been made about policy proposals.

FPI is currently working on a project to experiment with new ways to engage families in policy dialogue and to ensure that policymakers engage with families in a more meaningful and regular way. We believe that the starting point should be the matters that are of concern to families, and then it is the job of policy-makers to consider how a range of different policy areas would help alleviate these concerns.

5. Ensure effective application at a local level

A major concern about a national family test for policies would be that this would become irrelevant at a local level where major commissioning decisions are being made outside of the assessment that will have a profound impact on the lives of families. This is particularly important given that devolved decision making and budgets is a key feature of current public service reform.

In order to be credible and realistic, policy ambitions through the Family Test must be balanced alongside this recognition of the variability of services accessed by families. Provision of family and relationship support will vary considerably at local level – and potentially increasingly so over the coming years in the context of tighter budgets and so we believe that a conversation about what parents and families can expect from a range of different services is an effective starting point for enhancing family wellbeing.

We think that such variations in service availability and quality (for example gaps in Health Visitor vacancies or service quality by locality) do need attention if families are to benefit from the family proofing of policies and experience improved services in their local context and community.

We feel then that there is potential work to be done to give citizens an idea of what to expect from services – a sort of family entitlement – that could be developed alongside the Family Test. Such an entitlement would act as a positive force for change as it would drive expectations of, and demand for, services– maintaining some consistency of offer in a localised, devolved decision-making environment. This could also help parental choice, those who feel let down by services or that feel they receive judgemental behaviour from service providers. In other words, we believe that a family entitlement would help make a reality of the aspiration underpinning the idea of a Family Test.

6. Independent assessment of progress and implementation stage

Our final point relates to evaluation of progress and what is gained from the introduction of a family test. Evaluation is particularly important because determining the actual effects of any policy outcome is extremely difficult. It requires effective and comparable monitoring data, the ability to isolate the attribution of specific interventions, and above all, takes time and requires patience. Without good data and evaluation, the information assessed at the formulation stage will always be contested.

The weight and credibility of a family test would be made much stronger if the government would commit to the independent evaluation and auditing of such a test. The FPI Family Friendly Report Card provides one potential framework for analysing this. We believe that an annual independent assessment of progress towards becoming a family friendly society is a critical factor in the family test being a success.

Family and Parenting Institute
430 Highgate Studios
53-79 Highgate Road
London, NW5 1TL

Tel: 0207 424 3460
Fax: 0207 485 3590
Email: info@familyandparenting.org
Web: www.familyandparenting.org

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