

A MANIFESTO TO STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

Policies for a Conservative Government to strengthen families



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Introduction

We are Conservative MPs and Peers who work together to support the Government in delivering policies aimed at strengthening families, as part of its wider ambition for social reform. The evidence is clear that stronger families are vital if the Government is to achieve its welcome aims to increase social mobility, deliver social justice, and make Britain a country that works for everyone, not just a privileged few.

They are also vital for our economic competitiveness. While the price tag for family breakdown has been set at £48bn, this is a fraction of the overall cost: stable, productive families that function well are usually wealth creators, fractured families are far more likely to be dependent on the state. Strengthening families is a social justice priority: by the age of five almost half of children in low-income households have seen their families break apart, compared to only 16 per cent of children in higher income households.

Stronger families are essential for social mobility because children from a range of social backgrounds who experience family breakdown are more likely to experience behavioural problems and to underachieve at school. They are then disadvantaged when they try to get a job. They also have poorer physical and mental health and as teenagers they will have higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use. They are more likely to become pregnant or a parent at an early age.

Family breakdown is not just about separation and divorce. Children will also fare badly in families where there are no safe, stable and nurturing relationships, whether their parents are still together or not and however much money is coming into the household. Conflict that is constantly spilling over into explosive anger or spreading a dark cloud of coldness and indifference produces a toxic environment to live in. Growing up without a father can be very painful for some children and over a million have no meaningful relationship with their fathers.

All these factors compound existing disadvantages and make it far less likely that children and young people will lead the successful and fulfilling adult lives we want for everyone in this country. That is why we believe any strategy aimed at improving lives in our poorest areas needs to ensure children get the best possible start in their early years, address the impact of family breakdown, and recognise the importance of supportive and nurturing family relationships in boosting life chances.

The UK has one of the highest levels of family breakdown in the world and record numbers of children are being taken into state care every year. We believe this Government can change this. Our Manifesto provides the Government with an achievable strategy for strengthening families and reducing family breakdown.

This Manifesto has the support of the Conservative Parliamentarians named within it.

Fiona Bruce MP
House of Commons

Lord Farmer
House of Lords



We are calling on the Government to:

A. Create a Government focused on supporting families.

Appoint a Cabinet-level Minister to ensure family policies are prioritised and coordinated. Ensure that in each department a senior Minister is responsible for delivering policies to strengthen families and for carrying out Family Impact Assessments.

B. Encourage every Local Authority to work with voluntary and private sector partners to deliver Family Hubs.

The Government should encourage and enable Councils to develop Family Hubs which co-locate superb early years health and other services with help for parents with children across the age ranges, and develop relationship support services for couples in distress or at risk of separation.

C. Promote the importance of active fatherhood in a child's life.

To ensure fathers are involved as much as possible from day one, maternity services should review and improve their support for fathers. Legal changes mandating fathers to be named on birth certificates should be brought into force.

D. Remove financial disincentives for those on low incomes to form lasting couple relationships.

Boost the marriage allowance for lower income couples with children and enable those on Universal Credit and entitled to marriage allowance to receive it automatically. Reduce remaining couple penalties in Universal Credit.

E. Use childcare funding to support parenting.

Taking part in a weekly Stay and Play session with their two year old child should be a requirement of accepting free childcare provision where the parent is not in work.

F. Promote healthy relationships to tackle the country's mental health crisis.

Ensure children and young people's mental health services help families, offering couple counselling where this is needed. Any child experiencing domestic violence should be offered support.

G. Relationship education should promote a culture that supports stronger families.

Relationship education should promote the importance of commitment and go beyond the classroom with a Government-funded online platform targeted at enabling young people to develop good relationships.

H. Help prisons to put the role of families at the heart of efforts to reduce reoffending.

Family and other supportive relationships must be treated as indispensable to the success of the Government's reforms which aim to make prisons safer and reduce re-offending.

Create a Government focused on supporting families

POLICY 1

Supporting families cuts across every part of government and requires a high level of cross departmental working. To deliver this effectively, a Cabinet Minister should be appointed with responsibility for families. In the same way that the Secretary of State for Education also holds the Equalities brief, another Secretary of State with a cross-governmental brief or one of the larger departments such as Work and Pensions or Communities and Local Government should also bear named responsibility for Families. They would require an equivalent body to the Government Equalities Office based in DfE: a dedicated budget and civil service team to enable the prioritisation and co-ordination of family policies across government.

POLICY 2

Ensure every Government Department has a Minister who is responsible for ensuring that policies aimed at strengthening families are delivered as part of their Department's policy-making process. Supporting families should be included within all Departmental Business Plans to drive the development of bespoke family policies across every area of government. The Government should support the Family Relationships (Impact Assessment and Targets) Bill which replaces the Family Test with statutory Family Impact Assessments. Every minister with a departmental remit for families would be responsible for ensuring Family Impact Assessments were applied to their department's policy development.

POLICY 3

Amend the Welfare Reform & Work Act (2016) to mandate the Government to make an annual statement on the progress they are making in strengthening families, (for example by assessing changes to the number of children in need) and develop statutory family stability measures. It will be important to pay closer attention to the country's declining marriage rates: the Government should not be neutral about lower numbers of people choosing a relationship status that is inherently more stable and less likely to lead to people parenting singlehandedly.

POLICY 4

The Government's Drugs Strategy recognises the harm addiction can do to families and the 'important role of Peer support' as an 'essential component of effective recovery'. Involving family members should therefore be considered an important part of the recovery process. The remit and role of the National Recovery Champion should be extended to include an explicit reference to annual reporting on how families are being involved in the recovery process. The Drug Strategy Board should look at how parents can be supported to prevent addiction to drugs and alcohol from developing in young people and the extent of family involvement should be a reportable annual metric.

POLICY 5

Parenting and relationship support should be made readily available for military families. Life in the Forces holds advantages for families but it can also impose unique and significant pressures. Assistance to obtain help from family support services which are external to the military, to ensure confidentiality, should be offered as part of the Military Covenant. This would send a strong signal about our enduring commitment to the families of our servicemen and women.





Encourage every Local Authority to work with voluntary and private sector partners to deliver Family Hubs

POLICY 6

Family Hubs are local 'one stop shops' offering families with children and young people, aged 0-19, early help to overcome difficulties and build stronger relationships. Such provision is typically co-located with superb early years health care and support - such as in transformed Children's Centres - supplementing and not supplanting these vital services. The Government should put in place a transformation fund and national task force to encourage Local Authorities to move towards this Family Hub model, working closely with charities and local businesses, that will particularly help children in need. These should build on the experience of Councils like the Isle of Wight who have pioneered Family Hubs effectively, and from the local family offer pilots and provide services to reduce relationship conflict and support couples at risk of separation and those struggling post-separation. Alongside physical Family Hubs, the Government should work with the Family Hub movement to develop a virtual Family Hub offering online support and guidance that mirrors the depth and quality of NHS.gov and links families to local provision.

POLICY 7

The registration of births provides an opportunity for early support that should not be squandered. The Government should place a statutory duty on Local Authorities to make Birth Registration available in a Family Hub (or Children's Centre where the local authority has not moved to a Family Hubs model). This opportunity should be used to signpost new parents to support services and through a structured conversation identify families with early warning signs of relationship distress and in need of parenting support.

Promote the importance of active fatherhood in a child's life

POLICY 8

Maternity services should maximise opportunities to draw fathers-to-be in early. Fathers should be personally invited to antenatal appointments and fatherhood preparation classes to help them support their partner and be ready for the early stages of parenthood. Such preparation should, as standard, include how to recognise, with their baby's mother, the strains on their own relationship and how to cope with them. Hospitals should collect information about the experience of fathers as part of the NHS Friends and Family Test to refocus maternity services on supporting the whole family.

POLICY 9

The Government should bring into force Schedule 6 of the 2010 Welfare Reform Act which requires all fathers to be included on Birth Certificates (with appropriate exemptions). As well as improving child maintenance, this would enable local authorities to identify almost all fathers in their local area and alongside Policy 6 would ensure support could be offered to fathers at an early stage.

Remove financial disincentives for those on low incomes to form lasting couple relationships

POLICY 10

Couple Penalties for couples in receipt of tax credits means it often pays more to live apart than together. For low income couples this is a tax on sticking together. The Government should target an increase in the value of the Marriage Allowance for low income married couples or civil partners with children. They should enable those on Universal Credit and entitled to Marriage Allowance to receive the tax break automatically as part of their claim, and ensure it is not tapered away. Over successive budgets the Government should work towards reducing remaining couple penalties on Universal Credit.

POLICY 11

Promote high quality marriage preparation by waiving Marriage Registration Fees for couples who take part in an accredited marriage preparation course. This would help to remove financial barriers to marriage at the same time as encouraging the uptake of marriage preparation courses. As more than 70% of marriages are civil it should become recognised good practice for registrars to signpost couples to 'kite marked' marriage preparation.

Use childcare funding to support parenting

POLICY 12

Combine parenting support with free childcare entitlement for two-year-olds. The Government should ensure that spending on childcare provision is linked to improved parenting outcomes. The extension of free childcare provision for low income families with two-year-olds should be linked to parents attending at least one active 'Stay and Play' session per week where they are not in work.

Promote healthy relationships to tackle the country's mental health crisis

POLICY 13

Government strategy on improving childhood mental health problems should recognise the importance of improving family relationships and work towards the development of a family mental health service. Given the evidence that couple conflict is a massive driver of young people's mental health problems, couple counselling should be available for parents within Children and Young People's Mental Health teams as a matter of course. The Government should fund pilot projects to establish the hallmarks of the most effective practice.

POLICY 14

Police and Crime Commissioners should be encouraged to work with schools in their local area to ensure any child living in a household where domestic abuse is present is automatically offered early support.

POLICY 15

NHS and local public health commissioners need to recognise the importance of interpersonal dynamics to good mental health by extending the provision of Couple Therapy for depression where it is likely to offer better results than one-to-one treatment (such as cognitive behavioural therapy). In any given month over 90% of GPs see people with relationship problems and they should be able to refer these patients to accredited providers of relationship support.



Relationship education should promote a culture that supports stronger families

POLICY 16

The Government is reforming the school curriculum to put relationship education into the school day. The Government can normalise discussion of relationships and change the narrative on family breakdown by ensuring concepts like commitment, respect and safety are properly embedded within the new curriculum. The importance of active fatherhood should be emphasised. The evidence-based importance of marriage should also feature in updated relationship education guidance to ensure that we, as a society, become more confident about why marriage matters.

POLICY 17

Supporting relationships amongst young people shouldn't be confined to the classroom. Since the passage of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, Local Authorities already have to provide accessible and relevant information to care leavers about relationships. Relationship education (including the emphases in Policy 16) should be extended online with a dedicated campaign and virtual platform. This should be interactive (and moderated) and designed with young people's extensive and ongoing involvement to ensure it addresses relationship issues in the most relevant and engaging ways.

Help prisons to keep families together to reduce re-offending

POLICY 18

The Farmer Review, published in August 2017 by the Ministry of Justice, provides the Government with a roadmap for ensuring consistently good family work, which helps men and women in prison appreciate their enduring responsibilities to the family left in the community and becomes integral to the rehabilitation culture we urgently need to develop in our prisons. New and existing prison officers need better training about the importance of family and other ties; families should always be able to pass on concerns about prisoners through a hotline to the right prison staff and all visiting facilities should be child-friendly. We cannot underestimate the difficulties children face in keeping in contact with their parent inside and the profound and lasting negative implications for both the prisoner's and their child's life when this does not happen.





Conclusion

As we stated from the outset, this country is sadly a world leader in family breakdown, with almost half of all our young people no longer living with both parents by the time they sit their GCSEs and increasing numbers of children being taken into the care of the state every year. Escalating mental health problems amongst children and young people today frequently have their roots in poor family relationships.

Well-functioning families make a considerable contribution to society: they are wealth generators and vital to our nation's economic competitiveness. There are very high social and economic costs when families falter, and currently this country is paying a particularly steep price. This Government urgently needs to develop a strategic approach to strengthening families.

Universal family support should be available to those who need it in the same way that parents are assisted in the vital job of raising their children through the universal provision of health and education. The Government needs to work with civil society to normalise take-up of this support and to help change the culture. No family goes through life without challenges and easily-accessible support and early intervention to help families tackle these would be an investment well worth making, socially and economically.

Not only does it need to become more culturally acceptable for families to seek out early help when they are experiencing difficulties in their relationships, but we also need to challenge the assumption that family breakdown is inevitable. Whatever is undermining families' ability to thrive - whether mental health problems, drug and alcohol addiction, worklessness, debt, parents' own troubled childhoods, or a mixture of all these and more - timely, targeted support can be transformational.

No Government can solve this kind of complex and sensitive problem single-handedly. That is why this Government urgently needs to provide a lead and play its part alongside local partners in Councils, charities and businesses to prioritise the strengthening of families, the bedrock of a healthy society and the overlooked engine of economic growth.



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