

## **Assessment of Government Policies (Impact on Families) Bill**

### **Second Reading: Friday 4th Dec 2015**

#### **Introduction**

The Family Test was introduced by the Government in October 2014. The objective of the Test is to introduce an explicit family perspective to the policy making process, and ensure that potential impacts on family relationships and functioning are made explicit and recognised.

Caroline Ansell MP has put forward a Private Members Bill that aims to put the Family Test on a clear statutory footing, [\*The Assessment of Government Policies \(Impact on Families\) Bill\*](#). The Bill also requires the Secretary of State to establish objectives and indicators for policies to promote family stability and report on the costs and benefits of applying the Family Test at a local level.

This briefing sets out the background to the Family Test and the changes that the Private Members Bill hopes to introduce. It is supported by 30 organisations listed overleaf.

#### **What you can do**

We are encouraging MPs to support this Private Members Bill, and the Family Test more widely, by attending on Friday 4<sup>th</sup> Dec if the Bill comes to a debate. MPs can also support the Bill by writing to the Secretary of State, Iain Duncan Smith MP, to raise the points made in this briefing and by more widely using the Family Test as a scrutiny tool in Parliament.

#### **The Family Test**

Our organisations have warmly welcomed the Family Test as a tool to introduce an explicit family perspective to the policy making process. If it is implemented meaningfully, consistently, early on in the development of policy and in ways which are open to scrutiny it is a powerful tool to achieve a cross-government focus on the stability and quality of family relationships.

- The Family Test was announced by the Prime Minister in August 2014 and introduced in October 2014.
- [The guidance](#) sets out 5 questions that all policy or legislation across government needs to address before it can be agreed by ministers.
- This approach makes clear that all departments need to fully understand how government policies support strong family relationships and will allow departments to identify and take action to address any policies that could undermine them.
- The five Family Test questions are:
  1. What kind of impact might the policy have on family formation?
  2. What kind of impact will the policy have on families going through key transitions such as becoming parents, getting married, fostering or adopting, bereavement, redundancy, new caring responsibilities or the onset of a long-term health condition?
  3. What impacts will the policy have on all family members' ability to play a full role in family life, including with respect to parenting and other caring responsibilities?
  4. How does the policy impact families before, during and after couple separation?
  5. How does the policy impact those families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown?

Over recent months a number of MPs from across the House have tabled Parliamentary Questions asking departments about the application of the Family Test, which have received [mixed responses](#). These responses so far do not clearly suggest that, in this early stage of implementation, the Family Test is being used consistently and effectively across government. An alliance of organisations, including many of those listed below, has written to every government department to ask how the Family Test has been implemented and will publish a summary of the responses in the near future.

### **Assessment of Government Policies (Impact on Families) Bill**

Caroline Ansell MP came 20<sup>th</sup> in the Private Members Bill ballot, and has put forward [a Bill](#) focused on the Family Test. The Bill aims to:

1. Give statutory effect to the Family Test and require departments to publish results
2. Place a duty on the Secretary of State to make a report on the costs and benefits of requiring local authorities and NHS bodies to carry out equivalent tests on policies
3. Require the Secretary of State to establish, and make an annual report on, indicators and targets for the government's performance in promoting family stability

#### **1. Giving statutory effect to the Family Test and requiring departments to publish results**

- While we encourage the use of the Test at an early stage in the policy making process, which may be unpublished, transparency is essential in order to maximise the effect of the Test. We would therefore like to see routine publication of impact assessments of policies coming before Parliament against the Family Test.
- Without seeing the results of the Family Test it is impossible to know whether it is being applied in an appropriate way, or what influence it is having on policy. As the Test guidance states, 'the impact of policy, positive and negative on families as a whole, and how families can impact the effectiveness of policy can often be overlooked'; it is essential therefore that there is a transparent process through which to ensure that this does not happen.
- The Family Test guidance states that 'departments should consider publishing assessments'. A series of Parliamentary Questions have been tabled by cross-party MPs including Caroline Ansell, David Burrowes, Kate Green and Nic Dakin asking departments what use they have made of the Family Test and if they will publish the results. In response no new Family Test assessments have been published, with most departments saying that this is because there is no requirement for them to do so.
- We believe it would be helpful to both give the Family Test a clear statutory footing and require departments to publish the outcome of these assessments.

#### **2. Place a duty on the Secretary of State to make a report on the costs and benefits of requiring local authorities to carry out equivalent tests on policies**

- In an era of increasing localism and devolution, the impact of the Family Test will remain limited if it continues only to apply at the national level. If the Test is to be fully effective at 'family-proofing' policy, it needs to be embedded locally in decisions on issues such as health, social care and planning which currently bypass the Test.

- The issue of local policy bypassing the Family Test is compounded by the absence of relationships in national outcomes frameworks which set the landscape within which local health, public health and social care strategies and commissioning take place.
- There is clear evidence that strong, healthy family relationships (which are defined very broadly in the test) promote wellbeing, can help to prevent mental health problems and provide an important support network for people with mental and physical health problems; it is crucial that local policies and spending decisions do not undermine this.
- For example, in future family and relationships could be considered in Joint Strategic Needs Assessments which in turn inform Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies and priorities for commissioning to meet local needs.
- The Family Test could also be applied by local authorities when considering new policies.
- We support the Private Members Bill's call for the Secretary of State to explore the feasibility of the local application of the Test.

### **3. Require the Secretary of State to establish, and make an annual report on, indicators and targets for the government's performance in promoting family stability**

- It is important that there is a transparent and routine process through which the government's record on supporting family relationships can be assessed. This should be more than the sum of multiple Family Test assessments, but include reliable and holistic data.
- The Social Justice Outcome Framework committed the Government to publish data on 'the proportion of children who have a stable family free from breakdown, and the proportion of such families that report a good-quality relationship', although there is no statutory requirement to do so and there are limitations in the value of the measure currently used.
- We support the Private Members Bill's call for an annual report on the Government's progress in meeting the objectives of the Family Test, and would like to see reliable, holistic measures introduced to make this possible.

### **Supporting organisations**

Asian Family Counselling Service	Grandparents Plus	One Plus One
Association for Family Therapy	London Early Years Foundation	PACEY
British Psychoanalytic Council	Marriage Care	Relate
Care for the Family	The MARS Trust	Relationships Foundation
Children England	Mediation Now	Southampton Community Family Trust
Contact a Family	Mothers Union	Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships
Child Poverty Action Group	National Association of Child Contact Centres	UNISON
Family Childcare Trust	National Children's Bureau	Working Families
Family Links	National Day Nurseries Association	4Children
Family Lives	National Family Mediation	2-in-2-1
Family Rights Group	Netmums	

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