

Our Projects

The LIFE Programme

Building new Lives for Individuals and Families to Enjoy.

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In 2008, the UK's Prime Minister Gordon Brown famously said that there were 110,000 'problem families', and if the issues within these families were solved, much of society's ills would be cured. At Participle, we believe this figure is much closer to 150,000 and we call them 'Families in Chronic Crisis.' These families represent the point at which the current relationship between government and people has broken down to the greatest degree. They are the families considered the 'hardest to reach'. If we can build an approach and an infrastructure that supports a new, transformative relationship between the wider community, government and these families then we have repaired a deep failure in the current welfare state.

In 2009 Swindon Borough Council, Participle and a number of local families developed and prototyped a highly successful framework to support families in chronic crisis to build new lives. This new approach is known as the LIFE Programme (building new Lives for Individuals and Families to Enjoy.)

LIFE was developed by families for families. The Participle team rented a house on an estate in Swindon, and spent 6 months living in the community, as well as shadowing front-line workers. We initially worked with 12 families over several months to develop and prototype LIFE. We have now prototyped with 47 families and in 2011 we are scaling Life into 3 new Local Authorities with plans to bring Life into further Local Authorities in 2012 and beyond.

You can find more information on Life and its tools by going to www.alifewewant.com

The 'Families in Chronic Crisis' that we worked with live from day to day experiencing an ongoing pattern of crisis: domestic violence, debt, poor living conditions, feuds with their neighbours, alcohol misuse, truancy, the threat of homelessness, criminal proceedings, exclusion; which has become the norm. Antisocial behaviour is common but these families have often been victims themselves, are isolated from support networks, live in fear, have numerous and serious mental, physical and emotional health issues and, importantly, have never known a different life. It's often a generational issue, as their parents and grandparents before them, their siblings, children and grandchildren grow into the same patterns.

The costs these families incur, across multiple agencies, services and departments, is proportionately enormous: estimated at over £250,000 per family per year. What is clear is that the majority of this money is spent with little sustainable impact on families abilities to lead different lives.

In the landscape of family development there are a myriad of government and community initiatives focusing on prevention, crisis, early intervention, rehabilitation, restoration, further divided by age group

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and rationed by level of need.

LIFE was created to fit a specific purpose: 'families in chronic crisis' and those 'on the brink'. However by starting with these families, who are arguably in the worst position in society, it has been possible to understand and create something with much wider application – a new relationship between families and council workers that actively supports people to build the lives they want to lead.

For families in chronic crisis the pattern of court appearances, eviction notices, arrears notices, police intervention, child protection orders and parenting orders has become part of daily life. Support from services kicks in around these crises and pulls out when things get better - when the symptoms of underlying issues stop.

Like a gyroscope, there is constant activity around the family from services in reaction to a crisis, but at a deeper level, at the core, the families remain unmoved - unchanged. For many families this can mean a 20 year history of engaging with services with no significant change.

So why does this happen? If we look more closely at the way current government activity works, we can see that the way 'the system' has evolved now has frontline workers spending the majority of their time on the system itself, rather than in building the kind of relationships that open people to change and address causes rather than symptoms.

Looking specifically at one worker's engagement with a teenager in one specific family we were able to plot the following:

- + 74% of their time was spend on administration - monitoring, tracking, filling in forms, data recording, reporting, creating a paper trail, attending multi-agency meetings;
- + 12% of their time was spent supporting the teenager indirectly through liaison with other agencies, e.g. educational welfare, schools admission boards;
- + 14% of their time was spent in the family home, and the majority of this time was spent collecting information and data to fulfill the reporting duties in the 74%.

This means that next to no time is spent on a relationship that supports change. In addition to this, most interventions focus on one family member and in relation to one aspect of the problem – neglect, alcohol abuse, violence, etc – the agenda of the system, not the whole family.

This is widely agreed to be indicative of services more generally - with 80% of workers' time spent on the system itself and only 20% in relationship with residents. It represents a severe breakdown in the relationship between government and the people it intends to support.

What's needed is a new relationship between local government and residents that starts from a different place and supports transformation.

Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) go some way to addressing the 'whole family' approach, assigning a key worker to each family who 'grips' the other agencies and works with the family intensively to stop anti-social behaviour and improve life chances for children. They are the government's main response to 'chaotic families', and LIFE was developed in Swindon as 'the next step' to this model.

LIFE focuses on unlocking the capability for families to build and sustain the lives they want to lead through a number of enablers: the ability to value yourself and to become aware of what holds you back; a sense of agency and possibility that will allow you to create the life you want to lead; the ability to develop meaningful relationships and build new connections within your community.

This has been achieved by re-design the welfare state system around then, offering a new type of team of key workers, that work with the families in a particular and radically different way. Core to developing the family member's capabilities is this particular quality of relationship, built between the families and the LIFE team, that gives families the means and the space to change. LIFE focuses on changing the mindset and skillset of front-line workers to develop this new relationship.

LIFE is not service delivery in the traditional sense. It gives families the strengths, stories and relationships required for fundamental behaviour change. It builds connections and opportunities in the wider community for families to 'live in to'. It proactively changes wider system structures so that the programme, and the families themselves, are able to thrive.

LIFE has proven there's an opportunity to do something for less cost with greater impact. Based on conservative estimates of cost and potential for change by the end of the LIFE programme:

- + In 2008, on one family, a minimum of £183,080 was spent by services on engagement, monitoring, reporting and delivery of services, and those costs were expected to continue;
- + In 2009, more than £200,000 was saved based on changes already occurring in the same family after 12 weeks of being on the LIFE programme. These savings would build over time as the family disengage from numerous enforcement actions and other consequences of their previous behaviour;
- + The LIFE programme cost is £10,000 per annum per family based on 2 teams working with 38 families.

For more information on this project, please [email us](#).

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