



Department  
for Work &  
Pensions

# The Family Test

Guidance for Government Departments

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## Introduction

Whether intended or not, a wide range of government activity has a direct or indirect impact on families and families in turn shape how individuals engage with policy initiatives and use public services. While supporting families is an explicit goal in some areas of public policy, and is implicit in other many other areas, across Government as a whole we do not always think systematically about how policy can support strong and stable family relationships or how we might inadvertently impact on families.

The introduction of a Family Test was announced by the Prime Minister in August 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 in the process of developing new policy.

This guidance sets out when and how government Departments should apply the Test and has been produced in collaboration with the Relationships Alliance<sup>1</sup>. Using this guidance to apply the Family Test should be thought of as part of the process of good policymaking, not a discrete step in the process. Policy makers need to make their own judgements about how they apply the test in a sensible and proportionate way at each stage of the policy making process.

## Applying a family perspective in policy development

Strong and stable families, in all their forms, play an important role in our society. Families have a major impact on the life chances of individuals and strong family relationships are recognised as an important component of individual, community and national wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

However, while families typically mediate how policies impact individuals and how individual citizens engage with public services, the impact of policy on families is not always anticipated or well understood in the policy making process. The focus of policy is for the most part on individuals, users of public services, workers or narrowly defined household units. This means that 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.

The Family Test will address this. The objective is to introduce a family perspective to policy making by asking policy makers to anticipate the potential impact of policy on families at each stage of the policy making process, and document the potential impacts to raise awareness and support effective decision making and debate.

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<sup>1</sup> The Relationship Alliance is a coalition of organisations dedicated to developing strong and stable couple and family and social relationships. Members are Relate, Marriage Care, OnePlusOne, and The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html>

The test should not be thought of as just a discrete requirement in the process of developing new policy. To do so would undermine the contribution that a family perspective can bring to policy development, and render the process as a 'box ticking' exercise or bureaucratic hurdle. The Test has therefore been designed in a way that supports a degree of judgement and allows policy makers to consider family impacts in a proportionate way given the policy under consideration and the potential impact on families.

## The focus and scope of the Family Test

The focus of the Family Test is on strong and stable family relationships. The list below is not exhaustive, but covers most of the relationships at the heart of family life.

- Couple relationships (including same-sex couples) including marriage, civil partnerships, co-habitation and those living apart, together<sup>3</sup>
- Relationships in lone parent families, including relation between the parent and children with a non-resident parent, and with extended family
- Parent and step-parent to child relationships
- Relationships with foster children, and adopted children
- Sibling relationships
- Children's relationship with their grandparents
- Kinship carers<sup>4</sup>
- Extended families, particularly where they are playing a role in raising children or caring for older or disabled family members

## When the family test need to be carried out

While public policy by definition impacts the lives of individuals, families, communities and society as a whole, there will be policies, which do not have any impact at the level of the family per se, or where the impact is small and indirect, or temporary in nature. Where that is the case it may not be sensible or proportionate to apply the test. If policy makers are unsure, they should reflect on the questions and the rest of this guidance. In most cases it will be obvious where a policy is not in scope, but the indirect impacts of policy on families are not always obvious. **If in doubt it is recommended that the questions are addressed and any further analysis that is needed is carried out.**

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<sup>3</sup> 'Living Apart Together' is a term to describe two partners regard themselves as a couple but they are not co-residentially cohabiting.

<sup>4</sup> Kinship care means that relatives or friends look after children who cannot live with their parents'

## Carrying out the Test

Having determined that the policy proposal under assessment potentially impacts families, the next step is to consider the nature of those impacts, positive and negative, more carefully. Policy makers should think about family impacts in a similar way to how they consider impacts on equality as required by the Public Sector Equality Duty, considering impacts at each stage of the process. However, while analysis under the Family Test might complement the consideration of equality impacts, the two are separate responsibilities with the equality considerations required by law.

The Family Test Questions have been developed in collaboration with experts in this field to guide those considerations. The purpose of the checklist questions is to raise awareness of the aspects of family life and relationships that public policy can impact, generate insights through the process of addressing the questions, and recording anticipated impacts early in the policy making process.

You should reflect on all of the questions, but some will be more relevant than others for particular policies, while some will not be applicable. There will inevitably be overlap in responses to questions; it is not intended that particular questions are considered in isolation. Policy will often have both a positive and a negative impact, sometimes simultaneously, and sometimes have an impact over different time periods. It is important to try to capture this in your assessment. Given the nature of the impacts being considered, it is inevitable that in most cases the assessments will be qualitative in nature.

The level of detail you go into addressing the questions and what further analysis you do depends on the potential impacts and the nature and scale of the policy proposal. Where a policy has a specific family focus then significant additional analysis might be needed, potentially supported by engagement with external stakeholders, academic experts and families themselves through consultation, focus groups or other Open Policy Making approaches.

## Documenting the Process

It is important that the application of the Family Test is documented in an appropriate way as part of the policy making process. Where a detailed assessment is carried out, departments should consider a standalone document to bring together their analysis. Departments should consider publishing assessments where they are carried out, and where policy is being submitted for collective agreement through the Cabinet Committee process, the assessment should be included alongside other policy documentation.

## Equalities Implications

In preparing this guidance, DWP has taken into account the Public Sector Equality Duty, which requires public authorities to have due regard to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it

The list of relationships of relevance for the test, not in itself exhaustive, is not restricted by the gender or sexual orientation of the individuals involved; and does not exclude any relationships for reasons connected to any of the protected characteristics in the Act (i.e. age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation).

The family test can complement the existing work by Departments to consider the three aims of the PSED, as outlined above. Applying the family test and complying with the PSED should lead to better overall outcomes for people.

# The Family Test Questions

## **1. What kinds of impact might the policy have on family formation?**

Couple relationships are the starting point for most families, and committed couple relationships bring significant benefits for the individuals themselves and children in those families. The formation of couple relationships is a private matter for individuals, but Government policy can act to support, for example through law on marriage and civil partnerships, or inadvertently undermine commitment including for example through the structure of the benefit system. Policy makers need to think carefully about how they are supporting or constraining couples in making the right choices for them and their families.

## **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?**

Significant life transitions can put families under incredible stress and public services have an important role to play in supporting families at these times. Policy makers should think carefully about how the policy under consideration might add to the pressure families might face, and how it might provide support. For example we know that pregnancy and the birth of a child can put tremendous pressure on individuals, couples and families, but that high quality pre- and post-natal care can play an important role in supporting new parents. The financial and emotional stress that redundancy or long-term unemployment brings may have a significant impact on a person's mental health and thus family life, but advice on debt and support in getting work can help families manage the impact. Policy makers should think carefully about what particular transitions might be relevant, the nature and scale of the potential impact, and whether any negative impacts can be mitigated in any way.

## **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?**

All family members have a role to play in family life, whether that is the role fathers play in raising children, that grandparents play in supporting parents, including lone parents, or that the adults play in caring for elderly relatives or disabled family

members. While most people would recognise this aspect of family life, policy makers can sometimes fail to take a whole family perspective when thinking about the design and delivery of public services, sometimes underplaying or discounting the contribution of particular members, or failing to see the opportunities to support and enhance how families support each other. Factors for consideration include how policy impacts family members' ability to balance work and family life, the time families can spend together, and the competing demands of caring for elderly family members and children.

#### **4. How does the policy impact families before, during and after couple separation?**

Couples do separate, and that can be necessary for the individuals and their children. Nonetheless, separation can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of all of those involved. Government has a role to play in supporting families going through difficulties, helping them navigate separation in a way that mitigates the impact on children in particular. Post-separation the Government has a role to play in ensuring parents meet their responsibilities to their children and, where it is in the best interest of children, play a full role in their lives. Government policy can support families at all stages of separation. For example the Government funds relationship support services for couples facing difficulties, supports mediation services for separating couples, and the child maintenance system works to support parents reaching agreement on meeting the costs of raising their children. Policy makers should consider how new policy might impact families at particular stages, and look beyond intact families or households when thinking about impacts.

#### **5 How does the policy impact those families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown?**

There is a very wide range of factors that can undermine the quality of family relationships and contribute to breakdown. Some of these are related to specific behaviours within the family such as alcohol dependency, domestic violence or problem gambling. Others include family members with poor physical and/or mental health, those facing financial problems, poverty or unemployment, where family members are finding it hard to balance work with family life and caring responsibilities, where a family member is in prison, and the key life transitions covered under Question 2. Policy makers need to be aware of the potential direct and indirect impact new policy can face on families most at risk and think about how policy can support these families.

## Building the evidence base

While policy teams working on specific areas of family policy will have a good understanding of the impact of their policy on family relationships, expertise in this area largely sits outside of Government. Policy teams will need to engage with the evidence base and build their own understanding of how their Department's policies impact families. This will mean engaging with key stakeholders, using consultation processes to collect evidence, including family impacts in evaluation strategies and in some cases engaging directly with a diverse range of families, including children. The Open Policy Making approach encourages the use of a range of tools and techniques for engaging with stakeholders in developing policy and these should be considered when building the evidence base on how particular policies impact families<sup>5</sup>.

The Department for Work and Pensions will continue to work with experts across the family policy field to develop and disseminate the relevant evidence. We are developing learning materials for policy makers, and plan to facilitate workshops and policy seminars with Government Departments, drawing on the best available expertise in this area.

For further information on the Family Test and how to apply this guidance contact [family.test@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:family.test@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

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<sup>5</sup> <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk>