

Why the Government needs to act now to support the UK's relationships and families

Tavistock Relationships submission to Archbishop's Commission on Families and Households

Holly Ingram, Policy and Engagement Officer, August 2022

Formed in 1948, Tavistock Relationships is an internationally renowned charity for advanced practice, training and research to support couples, individuals and families. It is a leading couple therapy training institution and a provider of high-quality couple therapy, providing a range of affordable services to help people with relationship difficulties, sexual problems and parenting challenges. It also undertakes research, evaluates relationship support programmes and seeks to influence national and local relationship support policy.

Tavistock Relationships believes that churches and faith groups can play an important role in sign-posting individuals and couples to sources of support when they are experiencing relationship difficulties. We believe that helping couples and individuals in such circumstances is the job of skilled professionals. However, those involved in churches and faith groups can be helped, through training, to feel better equipped to have initial conversations with people in their churches and faith groups around relationship difficulties, while also being helped to understand the limits which that engagement should take before the need to sign-post people to more formal sources of help.

Since 1948, the state - irrespective of whichever party has been in power - has deemed the couple relationship eminently worthy of support. Following the Denning report of 1947 which instantiated voluntary sector funding to establish a state sponsored marriage welfare service, successive Governments have taken their responsibility seriously to ensure that relationship support is available to everyone in society. In 1996, the Family Law Act identified funding for relationship support services as a necessary part of divorce reform. The three objectives of Section 22 of this act were to support marriages, save the saveable marriage and bring an end to broken marriages with minimal distress.

Following the funding from Section 22, many innovative services have been developed by the voluntary sector in the last two decades. However, despite the progress which the relationship sector has made with the Government's support, in recent years, relationship support responsibility has moved between government departments and there has been a narrowing of the scope of funding to focus solely on the parental couple in conflict, particularly those who are workless (although the stipulation that the Reducing Parental Conflict programme should work with mainly workless couples was eventually abandoned). While laudable, this has lost the broader agenda, contained in the original Act, to support relationships and reduce family breakdown across our communities.

The recent reduction of Government provision and funding in the relationship sector contradicts the 74 years of support which has helped amplify the tangible benefits society has experienced through the work of the relationship sector.

While it has undoubtedly been encouraging that the Department for Work and Pensions introduced and funded the Reducing Parental Conflict programme there is much more that the Government could and should be doing to support couple relationships following this programme's conclusion. The original aim of the RPC was to test which interventions worked most effectively in reducing parental conflict. The programme found that high intensity interventions were the most successful as they had the greatest influence in the reduction of parental conflict ([Department of Work and Pensions, 2021](#)). However, despite this body of

research and quantitative data, the DWP have chosen not to provide funding to local authorities to commission training in these now evidence-based interventions but instead have created a local authority grant aimed at addressing inter-parental conflict which does not ensure that the learning and evidence gathered through the RPC guides local authority commissioning, with the risk that public funding for relationship support is spent on untested interventions.

Whilst the Government's decision to invest in Local Authorities to provide some basic relationship conflict work through their Family Hubs offers some level of support, this should not come at the expense of the research and experience relationship focussed charities have developed over many years which has proven to provide long lasting and highly effective solutions to the wider scope of the UK's relationship crises.

The roll out of Family Hubs offers an opportunity to embed relationship support services within local authority landscapes, however, Tavistock Relationships is concerned that their support may be limited to couples with young children, despite guidance which encourages local authorities to provide services for parents with all ages of children and young people. Tavistock Relationships takes the view that it is not only the impact of couple conflict on children which should be of concern to the Government, but that couples across the life-course should be able to access support through these hubs. Separated and divorced couples, couples who do not have children, and couples whose children have grown up, should all be helped when their relationships encounter difficulties. Single, widowed, divorced and separated people are among those with the lowest wellbeing scores in the country ([ONS, 2018](#)) and so providing support to these groups irrespective of whether they have children is of the up most importance.

The introduction of the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act in 2020 provides an opportunity for the Government to make support available to couples before, during and after separation and divorce. When Tavistock Relationships argued this during the passage of the Bill, we were in fact agreeing with the then Minister, David Gauke who stated when the Divorce Bill was introduced that: "Sometimes, a marriage will still be reparable at the point at which one spouse seeks the divorce. The current law offers little opportunity for repair [...] The ability to have a positive relationship after separation is particularly crucial for parents, as children's outcomes are improved by cooperative parenting" ([Ministry of Justice, 2018](#)). We still believe that the Government should be providing more support to help couples before, during and after divorce.

The impact of the Government's narrow and reducing support for the nation's relationships are far-reaching, affecting not only those with the lowest wellbeing scores in the country, but also the wider public's mental well-being, future generations of children as well as the public's physical health - an area of growing concern.

Tavistock Relationships believe that at least three-quarters of the indicators contained in the Government's Public Health Outcomes Framework ([Department of Health, 2022](#)) are directly or indirectly influenced by the quality of people's couple relationships. Research has found that alcohol consumption, childhood obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease are directly influenced by the condition of a couple's relationship ([Tavistock Relationships, 2011](#)).

A fundamental shift in how we approach health and wellbeing is required so that the enormous impact which the quality of couple relationships has on these domains is recognised, and translated into the support which people receive. In order to confront the current public health emergency, Tavistock Relationships would like to see the Government trial couple-focused approaches which support patients with diabetes, cardiovascular issues (including stroke),

dementia and alcohol problems in order to test whether improving the quality of the couple's relationship leads to better physical health outcomes.

However, it is not only physical health which is impacted by the state of our personal relationships. Research shows that people in distressed relationships are three times more likely to suffer from mood disorders such as depression, and two and a half times more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders as people who do not experience relationship distress ([Whisman, 2003](#)). Despite this, Couple Therapy for Depression is, essentially, the only couple-focused intervention available at any scale (and, even then, only minimally) in the NHS.

In order to address the current adult mental health crisis, Tavistock Relationships believe that psychological therapy/relationship support for couples should also be a routine part of adult mental health provision (particularly given the relatively high recovery rates seen in IAPT services from the delivery of Couple Therapy for Depression). We also believe that to effectively address children's mental health, the Government should trial the introduction of couple therapists, or practitioners with experience of working with couples, into child and adolescent mental health services. A group of conservative MPs called for pilots of this kind of work in 2020 ([Family Manifesto, 2020](#)). When Tavistock Relationships and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust ran such a pilot, they achieved impressive outcomes in terms of children's mental health and parental well-being ([Tavistock Relationships, 2019](#)).

Due to the significant evidence which points to the link between relationship quality and physical health, mental health and wellbeing, Tavistock Relationships believes that it is imperative to act now, to target relationship and family issues and, as a result, see our society changed as a whole. We believe that today's physical and mental health emergency can be addressed by viewing it with a broader lens which includes support for relationships. The objectives of Section 22 of the 1996 Family Law Act to support marriages, save the saveable marriage and bring an end to broken marriages with minimal distress is as important today as it was then. The Archbishop's Commission on Families and Households creates a valuable opportunity to re-affirm these three important objectives and directly address the current relationship crisis to create a stronger, healthier, and happier society.