



# All together now

**Stronger relationships for a stronger society**  
Executive Summary

A 2025 vision for supporting  
good quality relationships  
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relate  
the relationship people

# All together now

**The evidence is now indisputable: good quality relationships not only give our lives meaning; they are also critical to a vast array of outcomes of interest to policymakers.**

Couple, family and social relationships hold the keys to parenting, children’s educational attainment, child and adult mental health and wellbeing, quality of life for people in later life, and even preventing crime and anti-social behaviour. Good quality relationships are also the bedrock of a successful economy, while poor quality relationships and relationship breakdown can incur substantial costs for the state in picking up the pieces – estimated to run into billions.

In response to the large and growing evidence base on how the quality of our relationships impacts on so many aspects of our lives – in particular, on children’s life chances – policy makers have increasingly recognised supporting good relationships as a crucial public policy issue. Government has, for instance, invested in relationship support, introduced the ‘Family Test’ to ensure consideration of the impact of all new policies on family relationships, and piloted various initiatives to support other agents (health professionals, local authorities) to play their role in supporting good quality relationships as the basis of a strong society.

However, government activity on relationships to date, at both national and local levels, has tended to be fragmented and ad hoc, and the absence of a clear strategic focus on supporting good quality relationships across government has led to drift, with new initiatives developing in an uncoordinated and piecemeal way.

Consequently, the current ‘market’ (a term we use in its broadest sense) for support for good quality relationships is fragile and underdeveloped. On the demand side, stigma around help-seeking for relationships remains a serious barrier, which means that support is predominantly a ‘distress purchase’ in times of crisis, and consumer power is not well-exercised. On the supply side, the market is underdeveloped and siloed; provision has often been skewed by reliance upon injections of public funding in pursuit of a range of disparate policy agenda.

The demand-side issues have also meant that supply is hindered by the lack of information on what potential service users want; and the fragmentation of the market impedes the promotion of clear messages to people about what support is available.

In order to achieve the Government’s ambitious agenda to support good quality relationships as the foundation of a thriving economy, adults’ wellbeing, and of transforming children’s life chances, we need to see action to develop this marketplace. This means: stimulating demand and tackling stigma; building relational approaches into mainstream services we all access; expanding provision of ‘direct’ relationship support (such as counselling or therapy); targeting support for specifically at-risk groups; bringing employers into the fold; increasing accessibility by coordinating support and developing new ways of accessing support; and ensuring affordability.

In this report, we present an evidence-based, wide-ranging vision for support for good quality relationships in 2025, which identifies current challenges as well as potential opportunities, and we make key recommendations for policy makers, which light the way ahead towards the achievement of this vision.

**“Good quality relationships are also the bedrock of a successful economy, while poor quality relationships and relationship breakdown can incur substantial costs for the state.”**



Central to our 2025 vision for supporting good quality relationships is the movement from the current ad-hoc system of support towards a *whole-systems approach*. We need to move beyond an approach in which relationship support is thought of as a particular solution for specific problems, towards one in which everyone sees the benefits of supporting good quality relationships and of having a ‘relational lens’. Support for good quality relationships must be taken from the margins to the mainstream.

A whole-systems approach means ensuring that supporting good quality relationships is recognised as a core, shared objective across public services. Ultimately, this report calls for nothing less than a fundamental paradigm shift in the way the state interacts with families. Rather than a particular service or interaction between the state and a family addressing the individual needs of a service user or family member in isolation, policy needs to be designed around the recognition of the importance of relationships, and with a focus on the shared needs and collective strengths which reside within good quality relationships. Crucially, however, this approach must not only apply to work with ‘troubled’ families: we all would benefit from more relational interactions, and we need to broaden and deepen relational thinking across the whole continuum of needs.

**“Support for good quality relationships must be taken from the margins to the mainstream.”**

Support for relationships is not only about formal ‘relationship support’, narrowly understood as referring only to the work done in counselling rooms up and down the country. In reality, effective support for good quality relationships needs to operate *across a spectrum*, from promoting healthy relationships and embedding relational capability across society; through targeted support to prevent relationship distress at key times of life transition (such as having a child or becoming a carer); to support and protection for people at times of relationship distress.

Similarly ‘relationship support’ is often perceived as a ‘specialist’ activity – the preserve of specific provider organisations. However, we can support strong and healthy relationships in a variety of ways – and to be most effective, supporting good quality relationships needs to involve a *range of actors*, providing support in a number of forms, moving beyond simply a delineated marketplace for counselling, for example, towards an effective *ecosystem* of support.

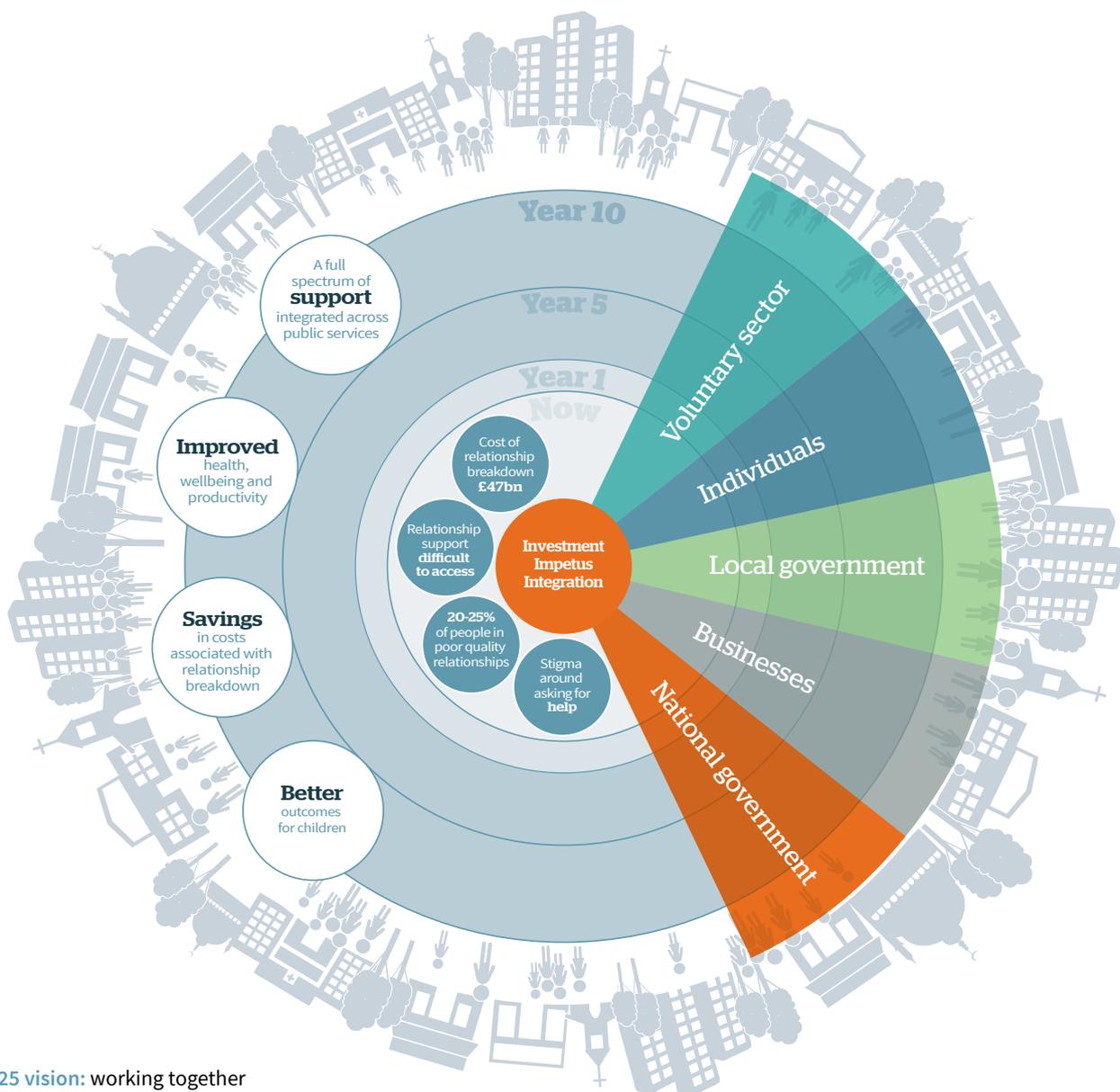
Because the quality of our relationships is so intimately bound up with our health, wellbeing, and a strong economy, there is a clear case for a range of actors playing their part in this ecosystem – to improve outcomes and ultimately reduce costs.

Supporting good quality relationships is ultimately everyone’s responsibility – we all share in the benefits of better health, wellbeing and improved productivity that result when we have good quality personal, family, social and professional relationships, and we all bear the costs of relationship breakdown.

However, in this report we set out significant challenges to be overcome in the next ten years if our vision of support for good quality relationships is to be made a reality. The Government has set out an ambitious agenda to improve family stability. However, we identify a significant gap between this

ambition and the current capacity of services (within and outside the relationship support sector) to achieve this, and there is little indication that local authorities, businesses and the voluntary sector yet have the capacity or inclination to step into the current voids.

It is clear, therefore, that in the short term, there will be significant work for central government to lead in driving forward a step-change in capacity to meet its agenda – and the relationship support sector stands ready to work with government to support this. However, if this agenda is fully embedded, over time we will see a gradual shift away from the centre, with local authorities, businesses, and individuals increasingly taking on responsibility, alongside the third sector, for supporting good quality relationships.



**Our 2025 vision:** working together to create a spectrum of support. Read on for a summary of our recommendations.

# Our 2025 vision

Below we summarise our ten-point vision, and the policy recommendations that we believe will get us there.

- 1** A joined-up approach to supporting good quality relationships, shared across central and local government
- 2** Central and local government work together on shared objectives, supporting good quality relationships as part of the wider wellbeing agenda
- 3** Supporting good quality relationships is written across local and national strategies for adult and child health and wellbeing

## How we will achieve this vision:

### A relational lens to national policy: the Family Test

Government should ensure the Family Test is routinely and transparently applied (i.e. departments publish Family Test impact assessments of all domestic policies).

### Local policies subject to a family test

Central government should encourage local authorities to apply the Family Test when considering new local policies and in the commissioning cycle.

### Local leadership and local relationship strategies

The Government should undertake capacity building work to support local authorities in developing local strategies for supporting good quality relationships, for example through a ‘family friendly communities’ programme.

The Government should work with Health and Wellbeing boards to identify, build upon and share examples of good practice in developing local relationship strategies.

### Data to inform relational policy

As part of its work to develop new indicators for family stability, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should insert a validated measure of relationship quality in a national survey to gather data at national and local levels.

Government should expand the What Works Network to include a What Works centre for relationship support.

### Reflect the importance of relationships in national frameworks

Government departments responsible for key national frameworks, in particular the Department for Health (DH), should identify how indicators of relationship quality and stability could be inserted into national outcomes frameworks.

### A joined up national strategy for supporting relationships

Central government should develop a cross-departmental national relationships strategy, feeding into the forthcoming ‘life chances’ strategy, to deliver joined-up national leadership.

Government departments including the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and DWP should work together and with other partners to build expertise in whole-systems approaches to supporting relationships at the local level.



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**The Government has taken up the challenge, working in partnership with the voluntary sector, to drive culture change around relationships, creating a social movement for good quality relationships, tackling stigma, and encouraging take-up - particularly in the self-funded market**

**How we will achieve this vision:**

**Reduce stigma and normalise support**

A public education campaign to catalyse a social movement for good quality, stable relationships as the basis of wellbeing, supported by government, but led by the third sector, and ultimately owned by a wide range of businesses, community groups and grassroots activists.

The relationship support sector and the Government should work together to draw on insights from ‘nudge’ theory and behavioural insights to design ways to stimulate demand.

DWP should commission work to understand the mechanisms for stimulating the self-funding market for relationship support.

**Overcome barriers in professional cultures**

Government should invest in training and guidance about relationship support for frontline practitioners.

## 5

**Promoting good quality relationships is embedded in mainstream services, with frontline professionals understanding the importance of good quality relationships, and taking responsibility for supporting them, recognising the signs of relationship problems, and knowing how to make referrals**

### **How we will achieve this vision:**

#### **Promote relational capability from the start: Relationships Education in schools**

All children and young people should have access to good quality Relationships and Sex Education, as a compulsory part of the National Curriculum, taught by specialist teachers or third sector experts.

#### **Build relational healthcare: the role of health professionals**

DH should develop national guidance for healthcare professionals, building on DWP's work, to support them to identify relationship distress, talk to patients about relationships, and make appropriate referrals.

DH should incentivise GPs and other health professionals to refer patients facing relationship issues to relationship support, through national assurance and payment frameworks.

#### **Reach new parents: building support for good quality relationships into perinatal provision**

DWP should work with DH to provide cross-government leadership in coordinating relationship support with perinatal provision, embedding the learning from DWP's perinatal pilots.

Local commissioners should coordinate or co-locate relationship support provision with perinatal support and birth registration.

#### **Treat families as families: Family and Relationship Centres**

DWP, the Department for Education (DfE) and DCLG should work together with local authorities to pilot the coordination of existing community-based family support into Family and Relationship Centres.

DfE's review of Children's Centres should recast these as Family and Relationship Centres, built upon a relational way of working throughout and including couple and family relationship support.

Local commissioners should ensure that supporting parents' inter-parental relationships is at the heart of parenting support interventions.

#### **Recognise relationships in later life**

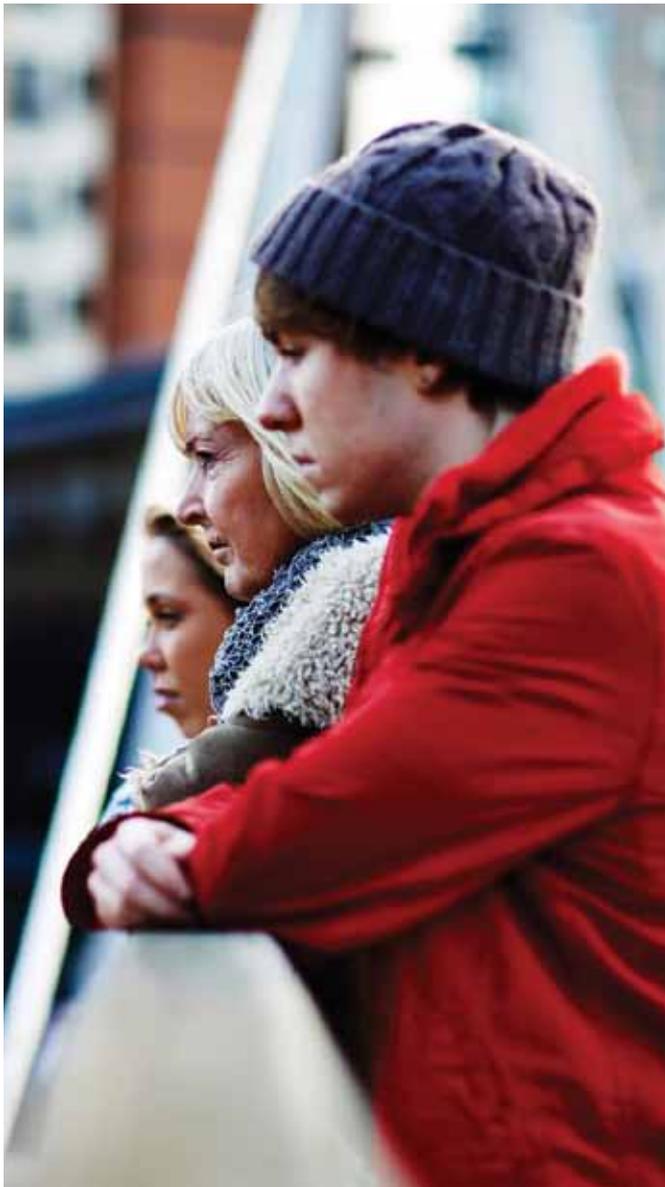
The Government should ensure that the roles played by older family members are explicit within its policies for family stability as part of the life-chances strategy.

The Government should extend training on relational approaches for frontline staff and commissioners to those working with older people.

Policy leaders including Public Health England, DH, and national voluntary sector organisations should recognise the importance of personal and family relationships in their work on loneliness.

## 6

**The market for specialist support is thriving, as more people access services as a result of work (with central government playing a key role) to stimulate demand, widen provision, and coordinate resources**



### How we will achieve this vision:

#### Stimulate the marketplace for adult relationship education

DWP should pilot training for civil registrars to support routine signposting to relationship education.

Working with the General Register Office, and local authorities, the Government should pilot waiving marriage registration fees for couples who have attended accredited pre-marital relationship education programmes.

#### Expand access to relationship counselling and therapy

Central government should increase investment in relationship counselling and therapy to increase access, support innovation in the sector, and to support the sharing of learning to inform commissioning.

The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and DWP should work together to consider how to build counselling in as an expected step in the journeys of all separating families.

#### Ensure children and young people have access to relational counselling

DfE should make sure that every secondary school provides access to counselling.

Central government departments should work together to provide relational training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to the Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) workforce.

Local authorities, in partnership with schools and children's and young people's mental health service providers, should join up children's and young people's mental health with support for families.

#### Join up family relationship support for separating families

MOJ and DWP should work together to create a single point of access into information and support for separating families, as part of work to implement the wider recommendations made in our report *Breaking up is hard to do*.

## 7

**There is increased support to access help for at-risk groups going through difficult transitions which place relationships under particular strain; providers, supported by government, continue to innovate, offering new services and building models for partnership**

### How we will achieve this vision:

#### Ensure relationship support for people with long term conditions

DH should ensure that the full range of NICE-approved evidence-based therapies, including Couple Therapy for Depression, becomes available in 100% of Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) services to ensure patients are offered choice of therapy.

Central government should issue guidance for Health and Wellbeing Boards and Directors of Public Health to encourage them to see couple, family and social relationships as part of their core work, as key determinants of health and wellbeing – especially for people with long term conditions.

The relationship support and long term conditions sectors should work in partnership to provide innovative support for people living with long term conditions.

#### Relationships at the heart of the ‘Troubled Families’ Programme

DCLG should work with pathfinder areas to test relational approaches to turning around the lives of troubled families and then roll out learning across the wider programme.

The Government should extend training on relational approaches to Troubled Families Coordinators.

#### Build relational approaches to the rehabilitation of offenders

MOJ should build support for prisoners’ relationships into national rehabilitation frameworks.





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**Businesses recognise the economic and productivity benefits to be gained by promoting good relationships at work and supporting employees to maintain their personal, family and social relationships; employment policy encourages healthy work-life balance**

**How we will achieve this vision:**

**To support genuinely family-friendly working**

The DWP should work to develop a Family Friendly Employer quality mark, in partnership with employers and the relationship support sector, which emphasises measuring outcomes (i.e. satisfaction with work-family balance) rather than outputs (flexible work policies).

**Employers to promote relationship support for employees**

Employers should promote relationship support for their employees.

**Support workplace relationships**

Employers should explore ways of supporting good quality relationships in the workplace, including training for HR departments.

## 9

**People are able to access the support they need when they need it, and in the way that works for them, with seamless access to a spectrum of support for relationships, delivered by a range of providers, through a range of channels**

### How we will achieve this vision:

#### Coordinate support in the community: Family and Relationship Centres

DWP, DfE and DCLG should work together with local authorities to pilot coordinating existing community-based family support into Family and Relationship Centres to bring together a holistic, integrated, wraparound system of support within the community.

#### Innovate to develop new ways of accessing support, creating a multi-channel offer

Providers of relationship support should explore how to use a range of channels to improve clients' access to services.

Central government and social investors should work together to create new specific funding streams to support innovation in the relationship support marketplace.

## 10

**Affordable or free support for good quality relationships is available to disadvantaged groups and those most at risk of experiencing relationship distress and/or its negative consequences**

### How we will achieve this vision:

#### Ensure targeted subsidised/free support for vulnerable groups

Central government should fund pilot initiatives to test out the most effective ways of targeting relationship support to vulnerable groups, including vouchers and digital access codes.



This is the summary of *All Together Now: Stronger relationships for a stronger society*. To read the full report visit: [relate.org.uk](http://relate.org.uk)

We are very grateful to the Department for Work and Pensions for funding this work. More research reports dealing with other relationship issues can be downloaded from [relate.org.uk/research](http://relate.org.uk/research).

For further information on the issues raised in this report please email [policyandresearch@relate.org.uk](mailto:policyandresearch@relate.org.uk)

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## About Relate

Relate is the UK's leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year.

Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

**We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:**

- delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

[relate.org.uk](http://relate.org.uk)

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