

BETTER SERVICES FOR PARENTS

Good parenting is the key to successful outcomes for children.ⁱ The National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI), Parenting UK (PUK), One Plus One and Parentline Plus are the four key national organisations jointly concerned with the design and delivery of effective parenting support services and between us we have considerable expertise and experience of parenting support work. We welcome the renewed interest in parenting support from Government, and from the Opposition.

This paper addresses the needs of parents for support at the universal level. We acknowledge the considerable effort that is needed to support families who are more vulnerable; we are pleased that Government is addressing the needs of these families in the Action Plan for Social Exclusion. However, our overriding concern is that unless proper support is made available universally to anyone parenting a child, that meets their immediate needs, families will continue to be left adrift until difficulties are severely entrenched and they will only then obtain services that are by definition targeted, expensive and long term.

We welcome the intention to provide services to parents at the universal level, as described in Every Child Matters and Change for Children implementation actions. However, we remain concerned that insufficient attention is being paid to the practical and resource issues that must be addressed for this to become a reality. We therefore offer the following recommendations, all intended to enable Government to connect the various initiatives currently being discussed, and to ensure that sustainable services are commissioned, resourced and provided to anyone caring for a child.

1. A skilled workforce

An appropriately skilled and supported workforce (paid and volunteer) is essential for the delivery of quality services to support parents and the resultant impact on outcomes for children. The evidence is clear that “how we work with parents is as important as what we do”.ⁱⁱ

To date, parenting support has been developed in a largely fragmented and uncoordinated way, and mainly delivered by professionals, practitioners and volunteers, few of whom have received specific training in working with parents or been recruited for their qualities in working with parents. It is however important to note that there is a potentially huge workforce, which includes teachers, social workers, youth workers, health visitors and midwives as well as volunteers and staff working within the voluntary sector. Unless and until we build the skills of this workforce, universal parenting support will never exist.

National Occupational Standards for work with parents do now exist, and the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners is to be established. This is therefore a once in a lifetime opportunity

to build an infrastructure to support the development of effective models and methods of service delivery with an appropriately trained workforce.

Recommendations:

1.1. Investment should be provided via the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners to develop and provide a range of modular training, including on the job training, leading to nationally recognised accreditation which maps on to the National Transferable Framework of Qualifications.

1.2. Local Authorities, PCTs and others commissioning and providing services to parents should be given guidance to ensure that within a five year time frame all practitioners working with parents must meet the National Occupational Standards for work with parents. This will ensure that all practitioners working directly with parents are:

- recruited, trained and supported to work in flexible, responsive and respectful ways, so that they can respond to the different and varied needs of parents, and work in ways that value parents' own expertise in their family.
- trained and supported to work with parents to address the issues of the adult parent relationships as well as the parent- child relationship, as there is strong research evidence to indicate that this is critical to making the difference to outcomes for children.ⁱⁱⁱ
- trained in child protection/safeguarding and can work to local and agency procedures
- trained to work with anyone in a parenting role – including mothers, fathers, grandparents, stepparents

1.3. In the interim, the DfES should provide guidance to Local Authorities, PCTs and others commissioning and providing services to enable them to ensure that practitioners are trained and adequately supervised/supported to enable them to understand when and how and where to signpost parents to services, and to undertake specific types of work with parents. Group based work, individual work, telephone based work all require different knowledge and skills. Working with particular groups of parents on more complex and specialist needs also requires specialist knowledge and skills – for instance families where domestic violence is present, or where substance misuse is an issue.

2. Needs led services

The state has a legitimate concern for the well being and safety of children. This means that some services may need to be compulsory for some parents. However, all services are most effective when those for whom they are designed are actively involved in their design and delivery. This avoids waste by ensuring the relevance of services to parents' needs.

Many community and neighbourhood regeneration initiatives have made good use of parents' strong desire to develop their local community. However, community [development/regeneration] initiatives are often separate from parenting initiatives in their development and implementation. Yet, parents taking part in parenting initiatives frequently go on to volunteer in their area, go on to employment and/or further skills training, and so contribute to the development of social capital, keeping their skills, energy and commitment within their community, and actively involved in the provision of appropriate services in their community.

Black and minority ethnic communities have not been well served by most services, and this is also true of parenting and family support services. Any consultation with parents must include

consultations with minority communities present in an area, and all commissioning needs to ensure that services will meet the needs of minority communities.

Similarly, the majority of parenting support services reach mothers and few reach fathers. Services to support parents should be for anyone caring for a child and attention needs to be given to the needs of fathers and others in a parenting role.

Recommendations:

2.1 Local authorities and providers should be required to consult with parents and carers (as service users and prospective service users) when commissioning, designing, developing or reviewing services, and monitoring that this requirement is being fulfilled should be part of inspections.

2.2 Community building initiatives should be required to link with parenting initiatives and services to ensure that appropriate links are made and sustained.

2.3 All service commissioners and providers should be required to set appropriate targets to reach and to work with black and minority ethnic communities and with fathers, and are monitored against these targets.

3. Remedying gaps in provision

There is no shared definition of different tiers of services that are required at local and national level. There is very patchy provision at all service tiers, and considerable evidence that even those families with very high levels of need are not accessing services early enough to prevent crisis.^{iv}

Currently, most direct services to parents are delivered by the voluntary sector. Often the funding is short term, and from multiple sources. This makes long term and strategic planning almost impossible and it leads to a terrible wastage of skill and expertise as projects come and go, leaving service users high and dry.

Recommendations:

3.1 The DfES (as the lead Government dept) should supply an agreed definition of tiers of services that should be available at all local authorities.

This definition should ensure that

- any parent or carer experiencing difficulties can access national and local provision without referral, when they need it
- information and support are available at key transition times – having a baby, starting school, transferring school, pre teens, divorce and separation and the forming of a new couple
- signposting and referral to more specialist agencies for families experiencing particular difficulties, including domestic violence, substance misuse, homelessness, couple relationship difficulties

3.2 Local authorities working with PCTs should be required to map local service provision against this definition. Local authorities should be required to commission services to meet the

gaps, and ensure that Children's Information Services are capable of giving parents accurate and up-to-date information on local parenting support services.

3.3 Funding streams to Local Authorities and PCTs should be streamlined (and include Community building funding streams and 'Respect' Action plan funding streams) so that they are able to plan strategically

3.4 Local Authorities and PCTs should be required to implement the Compact so that the relationship with the voluntary sector is enhanced and the voluntary sector is able to make long term plans and commitments.

In conclusion

The commitment to provide universal parenting services through Children's Centres and Extended schools is very welcome. However, we are deeply concerned that sufficient funds will not be available for this to actually happen. We are also concerned that these services will not be available to all parents in a local authority as these services will not cover a whole authority. Furthermore, we are alarmed at the erosion of peri-natal support services to parents – health visitor numbers are at their lowest for many years, and funding for their training is negligible. We ask that a real and sustained commitment is made to offering high quality universal parenting support services so that all parents can be supported to do their best for the next generation.

i Desforges C. and Abouchaar A. *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A literature review*. DfES Research Report 433, 2003.

ii Quinton D, *Supporting Parents, Messages from Research*, DH DfES, 2004.

iii Reynolds, J. (Ed) Harold, G. and Pryor, J. *Not in front of the Children? How the conflict between parents affects children*. (London: One Plus One) 2001.

iv Ghate D, Hazel N *Parenting in Poor Environments*. Policy Research Bureau, 2001.