

## RESPONSE OF INNER CITY SOUTH BELFAST SURE START TO: Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland

### **Introduction**

Inner City South Belfast Sure Start (ICSBSS) is one of 27 Sure Start programmes in N.I. funded through the DHSS&PS to work with families who have children under 4 years of age in order to improve health, the ability to learn, social and emotional development and to strengthen families and communities.

ICSBSS was set up 6 years ago and is targeted at the inner city communities of the Village, Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, Markets and Lower Ormeau along with Taughmonagh, Ballynafeigh and Chinese families in all of South Belfast.

We offer a range of services to local families including home visiting, crèches and group activities for parents. The programme has strong links with the South and East Belfast Trust as well as with a number of local nursery and primary schools both in relation to family support and generic health and education initiatives.

Most of the communities in the South Belfast Sure Start programme and consequently the families we work alongside experience high levels of social and economic disadvantage with certain families and groups of people living in severe poverty. Inner City South Belfast therefore welcomes this opportunity to respond to the draft Regional Family and Parenting Strategy – ‘Families Matter’.

### **General Comments**

The aims, vision, principles and outcomes are all very laudable statements or aspirations with which ICSBSS would have no difficulty with and indeed welcome. However, when these statements are matched with the actions under the 5 Priority Themes it is difficult to envisage how they will be achieved. The actions listed are reasonably specific and measurable such as 9 new Sure Starts, parenting courses etc. but there are no indicators for assessing whether these outputs will actually improve outcomes for children and families. We would be particularly concerned in this regard because the strategy is based on a list of services or activities that either already exist or will by March 2008 with no longer-term goals or vision.

### **Scope of the Strategy**

The issue with the lack of vision is compounded because of a lack of clarity about the focus of the strategy or what is meant by the terminology. For example, in the introduction (1.3) there is a list of life

events given such as homelessness that might mean “a little bit of extra help is needed”. This type of broad family support is alluded to again when the scope of the strategy is described as being “primarily preventative and early intervention to support parents *at particular times of need...*”(our italics). Yet, in Priority Theme One – Parental Support, the purpose is described as “helping parents gain the skills they need to help their children reach their full potential”. The focus is therefore almost entirely on parent’s skills/capacity in relation to parenting as opposed to the full range of circumstances and supports that might be needed. In the example of a homeless family the parent/s might have excellent parenting skills and understand full well the negative consequences of the situation on their children’s development and general well-being. The type of family support required is therefore much broader than help with ‘parenting skills’. Having considered all 5 themes and associated actions the only resources the strategy seems to offer a family that does not live in the 20% of wards with a Sure Start programme and have a child under 4 years of age is a regional helpline and perhaps a parenting class. In regards to Sure Start there is also some confusion about whether “support for families and parents” encompasses family support as well as parenting support. In the past the policy appeared to be that families with high needs should be signposted from Sure Start programmes to statutory services. The reality is that families with more complex needs or ‘particular needs’ are then signposted straight back again to Sure Start for support services!

### **Priority Themes**

The 5 themes and the actions listed are all welcome in their own right. The action about raising awareness of alternatives to physical punishment however only underlines the confusion that arises from not having clear legislation making hitting children illegal (as with adults). However, as stated previously the actions either restate government policy or services already being provided that are funded (or partially funded) by government. The document does state that some of these services such as family mediation and child contact centres will be expanded but does not specify by how much or whether there will be additional resources made available to do so.

### **Gaps**

Given the above concerns we would like to take this opportunity to point out what we see are some of the major limitations or gaps within this draft strategy in relation to family and parenting support. The following are issues that have arisen within our own work with families and consultations with parents/carers on our services.

1. Families with Children over 4 – Sure Start is limited to supporting families with at least one child under 4 and Home-Start (which for some reason is not mentioned as one of the other main providers of family support in NI) to children under 5 years. Many families have older children and it is often these children (not the pre-schoolers in the family) that parents feel they need support with. As already stated unless parents happen to live in a Sure Start area and happen to have a younger child they have no-one to turn to but a helpline. Many parents we work with would not be comfortable with calling a helpline, looking up websites for advice etc. For parents who lack confidence (and there are a whole range of possible reasons for this) the idea of going to a group type of activity such as a parenting programme is also unrealistic. Our experience for particularly vulnerable groups of parents (and therefore children) such as parents with mental and physical illnesses, literacy and learning difficulties and poor experiences of being parented themselves is that individual contact is essential at least in the initial support stages. In terms of universal services it should be noted that most people do not see a Health Visitor again after their child has its 4 year assessment and it is extremely unlikely families would have a Social Worker unless there are clear child protection concerns. ICSBSS would therefore suggest that the Sure Start age group be raised to at least 6 years and that statutory Social Services be resourced to employ or contract family support assistants to provide one-to-one support for families with older children at times of need.
2. Families outside of Sure Start areas – for ICSBSS one of the most disappointing elements of the strategy is the lack of vision for the development of Sure Start in NI. At the very least we would have expected a commitment to extending Sure Start to the 30% most deprived wards in the short to medium term with further expansion planned for the longer term. In this context we note that schools in the 30% most deprived wards in NI already receive funding through the extended schools package and that in the rest of the UK the 30% band of Sure Start provision was surpassed some years ago. In terms of existing Sure Start provision there should be clear guidance/assistance given to ensure every programme is offering accessible family and parenting support as part of their core menu of services.
3. Linkage with other relevant services and providers – aside from a few specified agencies such as the Office of Law Reform there is a general lack of reference to and ‘joined up’ actions/targets with other relevant agencies and organisations. ICSBSS would strongly

concur with the statement at point 1.17 “we must therefore shift the balance of family support to those services that assist with early intervention and the prevention of crisis”. We are therefore disappointed that there is almost no reference to Social Services and in particular targets/actions that might begin to move the balance of the work of this core statutory provision from a crisis management child protection service to a more preventative family support ethos. The ‘Our Children and Young People – Our Shared Responsibility’ (Inspection of Child Protection Services in NI Overview Report, December 2006) raised issues around the high thresholds for intervention in some Trusts and recommended that Boards and Trusts should “review and clarify their thresholds for entitlement to services and ensure that children and young people and families in need have access to timely and appropriate preventative and support services”. There needs to also be more demonstrable linkages between DHSS&PS and other Departments. In particular the Department of Education with its remit for Early Years and Extended Schools should have family support and parenting crossovers. OFM/DFM are also currently consulting on a Lone Parent Strategy which also seems to have relevant measures. In terms of moving to a preventative approach it would be important to ensure parenting awareness/knowledge was an area that was addressed within the school curriculum for all teenagers. As stated above, apart from Sure Start, there is a lack of recognition within the document about the current levels of family and parenting support provided by the voluntary and community organisations and indeed how this could be built on to provide more accessible and responsive services for families and children. Finally, the Strategy needs to recognise and support the role of the extended family, grandparents etc. who are probably the main resource for families, particularly at times of crisis.