



NCH Northern Ireland Response to

Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland - DHSSPS Proposals on a Regional Family and Parenting Strategy

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About NCH

NCH is one of the UK's leading children's charities, helping children achieve their full potential. Through our services we support some of the UK's most vulnerable and excluded children and young people and facing difficulties such as poverty, disability and abuse. We believe all children and young people have unique potential and that they should have the support and opportunities they need to reach it.

To date NCH has invested around £1.6m in developing and providing services for vulnerable children, young people and families across Northern Ireland. We have worked closely with children's services planning processes across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. Last year, we worked with around 1800 children, young people and their families with services operating in each of the four health and social services boards.

NCH services in Northern Ireland include:

- Larne Parental Support Project provides services to families for children with children below school age;
- Ballymote Family Project linked to the local Downpatrick Surestart which offers a range of early years services including a parent and toddler group, playgroup and crèche as well as group based and individual family support;
- Clooney Family Centre provides a range of group-based and individual family support activities to the greater Waterside area of L'Derry for families and children up to 12 years of age;
- Chance for Change Project which aims to support the mental health and well-being of children of primary school age. A programme is being delivered in local schools in L'Derry)
- Ballymena Surestart which provides a range of support service to families of children aged under four years of age;
- Floating Support scheme in the Sperrin/Lakeland district service for vulnerable young people at risk of homelessness and social exclusion ;
- Foster Care NCH NI started in September 2006 and aims to provide a regional independent fostering service and;
- The Western Area\Early Intervention Project is coordinated by NCH on behalf of the Western HSSB which involves over 60 agencies in the area working on developing action plans for the improvement of local support services for children, young people and their parents.

GENERAL COMMENTS

While NCH welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Families Matter consultation. While we also welcome the launch of the long awaited strategy we are also disappointed it seems to focus on developments and early years initiatives which are already established or underway (such as Surestart). We found few references to 'new actions' in the strategy and we feel an opportunity may be missed to focus more attention on early intervention and improving the coordination of family support services children in need in Northern Ireland.

Following these general comments, our response follows the format suggested by the Department under specific comments which are based on the outcome of consultations undertaken with a number parents and NCH staff, project managers and members of the Senior Management Team in Northern Ireland. As members of Children in Northern Ireland, we have also referenced support to issues raised in their response.

Partnership Working

NCH NI welcomes and strongly support the core theme of integrated, partnership working in Families Matter, its place as an outcome dimension (alongside the six outcomes set in the Children and Young People's Strategy) and as a priority theme through the creation of a number of children's centres across Northern Ireland.

We are pleased to see that integration and partnership working is starting to become embedded and supported at all levels of policy, strategy, practice and service development. However, this approach needs to be reflected in cross-government department working and within the new local government structures and health and social services and education agencies being created or remodelled under the review of public administration in Northern Ireland.

In addition to the DHSSPS, all government departments and particularly those with responsibility for education, housing and youth justice, should sign up to the vision and aims of Families Matter. Building on the good practice of multi-agency needs-led partnership working in relation to children's service planning, NCH supports the the four HSSB Children and Young People's Committees proposals on post RPA Planning and Commissioning of Children's Services. The delivery of Families Matter Strategy - as an important 'supporting pillar' of the overall Children and Young People's Strategy - should be underpinned by both a) a specific statutory duty to co-operate within the framework of a regional Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and b) with a general duty to safeguard and promote both the rights and best interests of all children and young people, as proposed by the Four Children and Young People's Committees.

The role of the voluntary and community sector

NCH welcomes the around taking the strategy forward through partnership and collaborative working and that the voluntary and community sector are viewed as 'primary agents' in the delivery of Families Matter. As our service profile above shows, family support and parenting provision are key areas in which NCH has expertise and we deliver high quality and innovative responses to meeting the needs of families and parents through our various services and contact with families and their children.

In our view, government needs to recognise that delivering on Families Matter will require long term and significant investment in the sector to take forward joint family support and parenting initiatives alongside statutory partners. This process should be guided by the principles of Positive Steps and the Compact between the Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (DHSS, 1998) so that the voluntary and community sector are recognised and respected as an equal partner, resourced and appropriately supported to fulfil its roll in the in the provision of frontline public services.

Initiatives delivered through Families Matter should actively promote an support early intervention with a longer-term outcome focused approach to programmes that significantly involve the voluntary and community sector. Contracted services arising from these initiatives should enable organisations to achieve full cost recovery (of overheads) related to service delivery and expect such services to be of the highest standards while striving to improve performance.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Q1 Do you agree that the aims stated are the right aims? Yes, but ...

The aims of the strategy could be more closely aligned to the vision of the strategy (see comments below) and also reflect the needs of vulnerable and young people children to ensure their families are supported in ways which would enable such children and young people to have access to opportunities to achieve their full potential.

Q2. Do you agree that the vision stated is the right vision? Yes, but ...

Parents consulted recently on the draft strategy felt the vision statement was very 'wordy' and could expressed in much more simple terms and more child friendly eg "we value all children and young people ...". We welcome the intention of government to involve children, young people, their families and communities in the development of preventative services (para 3.3) as expected under NI Act 1998 section 75 obligations and in keeping with Article 12 of the UNCRC which provides for the voice of the child to be heard and acted upon in decisions that affect their lives.

Q3. Do you agree with the 10 principles stated in the draft strategy ? Yes, but ..

NCH believe the Families Matters principles should better reflect and emphasise the role and status of parents as 'first' providers of nurturing, protection and support in their children's lives. NCH's experience is that service 'users' are not always parents per se but maybe grandparents, extended family members or significant adults in children and young people's lives who may form an important bridge between families and children and 'the community as a source of support'.

Also, the principles of the Families Matter strategy should be closely aligned with those of the overarching Children and Young People's Strategy, which recognise that all children and young people are unique individuals with their own individual rights, including being active participants with a valuable and diverse contribution to make to society.

- The rights, needs and perspectives of the children, families including grandparents are used to inform planning and service delivery decisions
- Policy development and planning decisions should be based on evidence of what we know about the lives of children and young people and works best for them and their families in Northern Ireland
- The evaluation of outcomes should be based on the further development of a robust set of measure and indicators (quantitative and qualitative) which are child rights centred and in line with those used to monitor and evaluate the 10 year children and young people's strategy.

Q4 Do you agree that the 7 outcomes from 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge' are the right outcomes for this strategy? Yes, but..

The proposed outcomes of Families Matter relate should align with those set by the overarching 10 year strategy document and be appropriately parent and family centred and concerned with creating confident, responsible, informed and empowered parents who can support their children to realise their rights and achieve their full potential – as the outcomes set in the over-arching Children's strategy.

Being Healthy – we would question whether it is realistic to frame this outcome in terms of 'enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle *free of alcohol and drug abuse*, with access to the services to maintain such a lifestyle' - given the prevalence of alcohol use and abuse in Northern Irish society and culture (including use and abuse by children and young people). How could we ensure an outcome framed like this would be achieved?

Making a positive contribution – the current wording / presumption of this outcome - 'add value to the community and society by not engaging in anti-social and offending behaviour' reads very negatively. NCH would recommend 'engaging in anti-social and offending behaviour' be removed and re-framed to articulate a more positive outcome statement which relates more to supporting families, children and young people at risk of coming into contact with the justice system.

Enjoy your rights – we would also recommend specific action should be included to support the creation of a society where parents and families are aware of and understand their rights vis-à-vis protecting and promoting their children's rights; and are enabled to support their children, in a positive and constructive way, to realise their rights.

Partnership working - As noted in our general comments above, NCH NI supports the core theme of integrated, partnership working in Families Matter and we welcome partnership in its place as an outcome dimension. However, partnership working in our experience is not always an easy process and often requires considerable commitment, trust, openness and transparency, resilience and resourcing and ability or capacity to give and take from all partners. Working in partnership often also requires a willingness to address issues of inequity, equality and power and empowerment and/or capacity building. NCH believes parents, families, children and young people must be also be recognised and respected as equal partners and empowered and enabled to speak out and be

ensure statutory, voluntary and community sector partners will work with them to promote and protect the best interests of their children.

Q5. The focus of this strategy is primarily on preventative and early intervention to support parents at particular times of need and at particular stages in the development of their child. Do you think that this is the appropriate scope for the strategy? Yes but...

While we welcome that focus of the strategy's should be primarily on preventive and early intervention services to support parents and support the intention to focus on the 'whole child', on universal support services as well additional needs (using the Hardiker model). However, in our view early intervention needs a stronger focus and the scope of the strategy should extend beyond early years universal services (such as Surestart) to cover children and young people aged 0-18 and up to 21 where a child/young person is in care or has a disability. Indeed it would be preferable to raise the age range for access to family support services to 25 in line with the youth strategy and international best practice.

To be truly effective as an early intervention and preventative strategy, we would recommend the scope of the strategy is not limited to 'times of need' and 'stages of development' but extends to providing ongoing support, where needed, across all age groups of children and young people throughout their lives and better take account of the difficulties which people living in rural areas have of accessing service. In our experience many parents have approached social services in time of need have not met the necessary criteria to qualify for help and maybe turned away.

The strategy's focus and actions should also provide support for families and parents of adolescent young people, including those young people in substitute families such as foster families. Young people can be particularly vulnerable at this time of transition into adulthood and may experience discrimination and negative media stereo-typing and at times can fall in the gap between children's services and adult services.

While we welcome the definition of family provided in the strategy we feel that this should be extended to include grandparents and /or other significant carers in children's lives who, while not holding legal responsibility, will nonetheless be concerned for the welfare of the child. We are also concerned in relation the specific reference in parag 4.5 to corporate parenting system that the strategy will not address children and young people coming in and out of the care system (children on the 'edge' of care). The strategy should acknowledge young parents' need access to family support services – yet are still deemed 'children' under the law

PRIORITY THEMES

THEME ONE - PARENTAL SUPPORT

6. Do you agree that Theme 1 - Parental Support is an appropriate theme? Yes

7. Do you agree the actions suggested in Theme 1 are appropriate actions to take under this theme? Yes, but

Health Visitors

NCH is concerned that the current trend to minimise the role of Health Visitors with the result that they are having less contact with parents and therefore less potential to focus on early intervention. Parents consulted on the Families Matter strategy reported they were not aware of support services (provided by Health Visitors). These parents suggested *"information on what help was available should be given by midwives or Health Visitors during pregnancy and postnatally ..and "the need for leaflets or a director of what is available to support families"*

A number of women in this group had experienced post-natal depression and described *long waiting lists to see consultants and counsellors (one woman had been waiting 18 months for counselling)*. They discussed honest and openly issues around *"other children (in their families)*

bearing the brunt of the anger and frustration that comes with post-natal depression” and they were concerned “about their own anger and behaviour towards the children”. The parents identified the need for “immediate support and help - no waiting lists, more resources, post natal support groups could be offered by Surestarts and good practice ‘Time For Me’ programmes that come with free childcare” and “more practical help should be offered to vulnerable women – one example given was of “a Surestart who calls around to see mother, do the shopping, help tidy the house, deal with other kids”.

Thus, what parents and families want most of all is access to *practical support* , *when they needed it* . Rather than a response limited to 9-5pm hours, parents need support during weekends and holiday times which can become particularly stressful when children are at home or off school for extended periods of time. NCH’s Larne project has developed an innovative approach in response to issues raised by parents suffering ante-natal depression called the ‘Blue-Belle’ group.

Sure Start

Families Matter has a limited focus to Sure Start. Surestart also need to extend their age remit to include supporting families of children of primary school age and disabled children and expand beyond current (20%) deprived wards in Northern Ireland to include groups of deprived families living in areas that would in overall terms be regarded as affluent.

There are a wide range of high quality support services beyond Sure Start provided by NCH and other voluntary sector service providers which must be recognised, equally valued, resourced and supported by the Families Matter strategy. A comprehensive audit of current family support services should be undertaken to help inform the development of the proposed regional information database.

Positive Parenting

NCH is aware that the law on physical punishment has recently been changed in Northern Ireland. The defence of reasonable chastisement has not been removed entirely, rather its application has been limited and it remains available on a summary charge of common assault. NCH regards this legal reform as a *missed opportunity to ensure the protection of our children*. This is particularly concerning given that the Government is due to report again to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in July 2007 and has failed to take the opportunity presented to positively address the Committee’s serious concerns regarding physical punishment of children.

NCH has recently joined the inter-department / sector group which is currently developing a communication strategy around promoting positive parenting emanating from the legal reform. Parents consulted recently were not aware of a change in the law and felt it should be more strongly in favour of children and were ‘amazed ‘ that the government are prepared to spend a lot of money on an advertising campaign and yet are neglecting to support parents who are not coping with their children. The parents consulted questioned the focus on discipline under the ‘positive parenting’ theme and suggested *this was off putting for a lot of parents who do not want to be ‘pulled up for how they are disciplining their children’*. They suggested the focus should be on *‘everything about parenting’ and not just discipline as this might ‘draw in a wider group of parents’*. They also felt there was a need to *offer 1 -1 support for some parents in the home as they will be unable to attend meetings or will not attend groups*.

NCH’s work in supporting and coordinating locality based family support action planning groups (in the Western HSSB area which involves representatives from a wide range of parents, community and voluntary groups and statutory agencies) is pointing to a number of emerging priority issues including:

- A high incidence of parents and education bodies struggling to respond effectively to issues around children’s challenging behavioural (including children of primary school age)
- Low self esteem (of adults/parents), poor parenting skills and not coping with poverty
- Isolation of parents (lack of support)
- A range of unmet needs of parents associated with mental health issues, domestic violence and alcohol and drugs addition problems and how hard it is to seek help on such issue
- Issues around Hate Crime (migrant families /asylum seeking families/children) and sectarianism

- The need for diversionary activities for children and young people at risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour and finding new ways of intervening with families in crisis (at risk of eviction)

NCH a range of training programmes on Challenging Children's /Adolescent Behaviour and Parenting Plus. Through this and other work, we believe action is needed to promote awareness of the emotional well-being of children within families. We would fully support accreditation of positive parenting courses delivered through parenting classes and extend greater levels of 1-1 support for parents at home.

Parenting Education

NCH believe all parents can benefit from the opportunity to share experiences, improve knowledge, find new approaches and work on their own parenting skills (para 5.15) and ensure this is extended to parents of children with a learning disability and to young people as they approach, enter and move through adolescence and make the transition to adulthood and young people aged 13-18 at risk of coming into conflict with the law. NCH has developed a range of Crisis Intervention services and Intensive Family Support models in other parts of the UK to help address families and young people in such situations.

Family Mediation and Relationship Support

NCH welcomes action to develop and expand family mediation and relationship support. While Family Mediation services have been in NI since 1997 there is a lack of recognition and valuing of the service they provide to an increasing number of families. Action must be focused on developing, expanding and appropriately supporting and resourcing existing best practice in family mediation.

In doing so, Families Matter should recognise that Family Mediation sits on a spectrum from formal Mediation which aims families of children involved to legal action and court settings (as a fre standing service) to mediation skills which are practiced in everyday situations in supporting families in the community and their homes. Thus, family mediation should be seen as part of a constellation or range of Family Support services with free-standing formal Family Mediation services at one end of the spectrum.

Child Contact Centres

NCH welcomes the commitment develop and expand Child Contact services in NI but funding is also need to ensure the sustainability of existing services and infrastructure to support the development of such provision. The role of the Child Contact Centre Network will be critical and enhanced to ensure quality assurance and accreditation of provision, training and development support for staff and volunteers. Training should promote child-centred practice and the central importance of listening to and acting on the views of the child when making and implementing decisions in relation to contact, whilst giving paramount consideration to promoting the best interests and safety of children in these circumstances.

PRIORITY THEME TWO – ACCESS TO SERVICES & INFORMATION

Q. 8. Do you agree that Theme 2 - Access to Information is an appropriate theme? Yes

Q. 9. Do you agree the actions suggested in Theme 2 are appropriate actions to take under this theme? Yes, but..

This priority theme must focus on access to preventative and early intervention services as support for families with children in need rather than veering into safeguarding and crisis intervention services, to decrease the need for families to revert to these high intervention services (see also our final comments made under 'Integration And Multi-Agency Working' below).

While NCH supports the development of a Regional 24 Hour Helpline for parents (5.3.4), we are also very conscious that such a Helpline already exists (provide by Parents Advice Centre NI) and would question whether this made lead to duplication.

Moreover, obtaining information and signposting about services is not the same as parents having access to local support services and getting the support they need. In our experience, few direct

support services are likely to be available or operate on a 24/7 basis. Similarly, while we would support the related action to develop a Regional Directory of Services under 5.3.0) the same principle applies, few families operate on a 9-5 basis the issue for parents and families is about being able to access responsive services in their area. There is also a danger that any such Directory could quickly become out of date if not very closely maintained and routinely updated and 'refreshed' - as local initiatives or support services are developed or indeed 'existing' support services (some very innovative, specific and time-bounded) maybe no longer be sustained, resourced or cease to be operate.

PRIORITY THEME THREE – ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS

10. Do you agree that Theme 3 - Assessment of Needs is an appropriate theme? Yes

11. Do you agree the actions suggested in Theme 3 are appropriate actions to take under this theme? Yes but..

NCH sees the merit and need in developing a standardised and integrated approach to the holistic assessment of a child and their family's needs, which help with more effective, earlier identification of additional needs. UNOCINI should encourage professionals to take a holistic view of the child and family and a standard approach to assessment should usefully promote the development of a common language of assessment across all sectors.

However, in NCH's experience, many vulnerable children and young people in need in Northern Ireland are not having their needs properly identified or met. In our view, a lack of effective early intervention and outcomes focused / holistic needs assessment together with lack of access to family support services is significantly contributing to the high number children and young people coming in and out of care or on the verge of entering the care system in Northern Ireland.

While many families of children in need are known to social services, relatively little is known about the true extent and nature of the "children in need" population in Northern Ireland despite the fact that it has been a legislative requirement on social services to assess children in need (under Article 17 of the Children (NI) Order 1995) for almost 10 years. HSSB led multi-agency, needs led children's service planning arrangements have contributed significantly to our understanding of this group of children as a whole. However, due to pressures from high numbers of children being referred to social services for assessment, gate-keeping arrangements mean that only children deemed most at risk are currently having their needs properly or fully assessed.

In our view, rolling out UNOCINI across in Northern Ireland will require a comprehensive training and support programme to ensure all those involved in working with the new assessment model in the statutory and voluntary sectors are enabled to undertake proper assessments of children and families in need. However, the aim of assessments should be to ensure children and families in need are directed to and can access appropriate support services (see below).

PRIORITY THEME FOUR – INFORMATION SHARING

12. Do you agree that Theme 4 - Information Sharing is an appropriate theme? Yes

13. Do you agree the actions suggested in Theme 4 are appropriate actions to take under this theme? Yes

We welcome the recognition of critical role which information sharing (between various agencies and organisations and others) plays in safeguarding children and timely, appropriate and effective support and intervention, where necessary, for families and children.

At a service planning, commissioning and policy development level, the 4 CYPCs proposed duty on public bodies to co-operate should help facilitate the effective sharing of information between professionals, particularly those at the frontline, within and across professional, disciplinary and sectoral boundaries.

PRIORITY THEME FIVE – INTEGRATION AND MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

14. Do you agree Theme 5 - Integration and Multi-Agency Working is an appropriate theme? Yes

15. Do you agree the actions suggested in Theme 5 are appropriate actions to take under this theme? Yes but...

NCH welcomes the commitment of government toward the creation of further Children's Centres in Northern Ireland. We are in the process of developing such a Centre in the Northern HSSB area. At a policy level, we would welcome the development toward the Department of Education and DHSSPS jointly taking lead responsibility for developing these new centres to ensure that health and social services are effectively co-ordinated and integrated within this new approach.

However, at local level, it seems there are few integrated systems or mechanisms in place to enable social services or other agencies working with families to effectively track whether children, young people and their families actually accessed services or indeed assess what impact such support services had for the families, children and young people concerned. In the absence of adequate, non-stigmatising, support services in the community, the situation for many vulnerable children and young people is in danger or deteriorating and reaching crisis points.

Thus, a key issue for NCH which should be addressed within Families Matter strategy should be to ensure effective coordination and access to support services for families if children in need or at risk of coming in and out of care. There is an acute need in Northern Ireland to develop, on a locality (new RPA HSST) basis *coordinated* early intervention integrated multi-disciplinary services for vulnerable children and young people at Level 2. Individual children, young people and their families should receive an appropriate range of focused services in line with their identified needs and UNOCINI assessment.

EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS - General Comments

NCH understand the DHSSPS has commissioned the production of a child-friendly version of the consultation document and have also commissioned a number of organisations to consult directly with children and young people on the draft strategy proposals. This is a positive step toward more inclusive approaches to policy development. The Department should take note of guidelines being developed by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on consultation with children and young people.. and encourage officials to liaise with the Participation Network with regard to developing adequate and appropriate consultation expertise.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

NCH welcomes the opportunity respond to Families Matter. We would like to see a greater focus on early intervention within the strategy and its scope broadened. While we support and welcome a number of developments underway we would also like the strategy to encompass a range of new actions. We hope you find these comments useful.