

Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland

General points

- 1) North & West Belfast HAZ welcome the priority of supporting families enshrined in the Department's draft document.
- 2) The document makes limited mention of inequalities and, indeed reference to external factors such as debt, mental health, addiction, poor housing, unemployment etc and how these could adversely impact on a person's ability to be a good parent. The environment is mentioned under paragraph 4.2, however, this could be strengthened.
- 3) Specific mention should be made of adoptive parents/foster parents. Whilst the term parent and families has rightly been made an inclusive term, nevertheless, there are particular issues which face foster/adoptive parents. In particular as a child reaches adolescence these issues have a pattern of coming to a head and specific help and support will be required for such parents at this time.
- 4) The overall focus on early intervention is to be welcomed in the document, however, this requires to be matched with a commitment toward the allocation of resources based on this principle.
- 5) The balance between over interference and support and assistance to parents is welcome.
- 6) There is a real need in the document to acknowledge the importance of inter-departmental policy and action owned across different government departments. Currently there is mention of cross-organisational working along with important work with parents and community and voluntary organisations. However, there is a need to prioritise this issue across different government departments with common objectives and goals (albeit that the document refers to the Children's Strategy for Northern Ireland). For example, the Department of Education's forthcoming strategy on early years appears to have had little reference to the current document. This point is also important in widening the relevance of other government policies referenced in the document under paragraph 4.7, which refer solely to policies within DHSSPS. There is a real need to ensure congruence with, for example, Neighbourhood Renewal and Renewing Communities.
- 7) The choice of outcomes will be critical to the implementation of the document and also the definition of 'success' referenced in paragraph 1.14.

Specific points

Question 1- Do you agree that the aims stated are the right aims?

Agreed. These are helpful aims, however, they could be strengthened under 2.1 by reference to actively seeking the inclusion and active participation of parents as part of this process i.e. ensuring that a parent's role is central to the aims of the strategy as direct contributors, rather than only as users of services.

Question 2 – Do you agree that the vision stated is the right vision?

Agreed. The position is a helpful statement, however, could be strengthened by some reference to an aspiration that children can enjoy childhood i.e. including further elements in the vision rather than limiting this to 'satisfying' lives.

Question 3 - The document lists 10 principles that underpin the strategy. Do you agree with the principles stated?

Agreed. In particular the need for holistic and integrated approaches to developing policies and services is of critical importance, reference earlier comments about the need for integration at departmental and government level.

Question 4 – The document lists 7 outcomes from the Children and Young People's Strategy, 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge'. Do you agree that these are the right outcomes for this strategy?

Agreed. In particular, reference to partnership working would require cross-departmental working in order to drive this integrated process forward.

Question 5 – 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?

Agreed, that the focus of the strategy is on preventative and early intervention to support parents. However, little reference is made to other relevant strategies outside of those mentioned in paragraph 4.7 and should reflect the cross-departmental approach advocated in paragraph 4.8. If strategies only reinforce a single Departmental strategy and priority then it will not be possible to develop a truly integrated approach.

Question 6 – Do you agree that Theme 1 – Parental Support is an appropriate theme?

Agreed. Some definition of what is meant by 'integrated services' provided by Health Visitors requires explanation. In addition, action suggested will promote

awareness of the role of Health Visitors through initiatives such as Sure Start, however, equally Health Visitors can be seen to support and promote Sure Start and other community initiatives which will bring added value. Specific paragraphs 5.11 and 5.12 reference positive parenting. It is important to be careful with language such as 'parenting education' and 'parenting classes'. Parenting support may be a more appropriate term. It is essential that the document reinforces positive images rather than highlighting where parents are inadequate. This is important not only in its own right but also in terms of de-stigmatising the support offered. In addition the focus solely on physical punishment in paragraph 5.12 requires extension. Damage caused by emotional 'punishment' can have as much if not greater impact on the developing child.

The Health Action Zone welcomes the establishment of nine new Sure Start projects across Northern Ireland by April 2008.

Parenting education

5.15 uses the word 'classes' which may be an unhelpful term in trying to reach more vulnerable parents. In addition the links to education and the role of the school is not referenced at all in this section. This reflects a focus on health and social services rather than supporting and using schools (including nursery schools) as a source of support for parents. There are many existing good practice examples of the latter. Further, there is much good work with community and voluntary organisations, which may often be better placed to deliver support services rather than social services, GPs and other 'professionals'.

Relationship support

HAZ welcomes the emphasis on support for children which will reduce the negative impact of parental separation.

Question 8 – Do you agree that Theme 2 - Access to Services and Information is an appropriate theme?

Agreed. HAZ welcomes the emphasis on access to services and information. The use of schools for consultation is welcomed and other options could usefully be explored such as community settings. The use of websites referenced in paragraph 5.32 is helpful, however, may need attention in order to become more user friendly. It is also the case that often families with the greatest need of support are the least likely to have internet access. In addition, whilst basic information on health and social services will be made available for those who are not proficient in the English language, there is a real need for translation and lay health advice for those who do not have English as their first language. This requires strengthening if we wish to improve access to services and information.

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

Agreed. HAZ welcomes a common assessment form UNOCINI, and would wish to see this scheme developed and used not only by health and social services, but with other key statutory agencies such as education as well as the community and voluntary sector.

Question 12 – Do you agree that Theme 4 – Information Sharing is an appropriate Theme?

Agreed. HAZ welcomes the commitment to information sharing. The development of guidance and children's information protocols will be an important step in meeting the needs of children and young people and should be done on a cross-sectoral basis.

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

Agreed. Integrated multi-agency working and multi-sectoral working is a critical means of developing and delivering better support for parents. A definition of what is meant by 'children's centres' would be helpful – are these expected to be new buildings, or rather and perhaps more importantly, new ways of working which ensure holistic and integrated approaches. Their role, particularly within the context of existing Sure Start networks, is to be welcomed but some further explanation of what and how such centres might operate would be helpful. It is essential that such collaborative working implied here and in other parts of the document refers not only to work between statutory organisations but also between community, voluntary and statutory organisations. In addition the impact of the transfer of functions to the Department of Education for Sure Start and other Early Years and Childcare Functions would merit further discussion, in particular what mechanisms will be in place to ensure the 'seamless provision'.

Appendices 1 and 2

Both of these models are helpful in explaining the different aspects affecting children and young peoples lives and prioritisation of need.