

**Parenting Forum NI**

**Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety  
Family Policy Unit**

**Families Matter**

**Findings from the consultation  
with parents**

**Submitted to Department of Health, Social Service  
and Public Safety, Family Policy Unit  
by the Parenting Forum NI**

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## **Context with Process and Rationale**

The Family Policy Unit in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have commissioned the Parenting Forum NI to consult on the 'Families Matter' document to seek parents' views on support and information services for families. It is intended that the proposals for the strategy will enable parents to access the level of support they require.

A key aspect of the Family Policy Unit is to assist the Government find ways of ensuring that children and young people's rights and needs are co-ordinated, monitored and promoted. Within this context the Parenting Forum NI was approached to carry out consultation with parents. This is an integral part of the work of the Parenting Forum NI and as such, the organisation has developed effective methodology to carry out such consultation.

To facilitate the consultation process a short programme was designed lasting approximately two hours for use with the parent focus groups.

The programme provided four distinct elements:

- Exercise 1 invites parents to consider the vision and aim set out in the Families Matter document
- Exercise 2 is based on the 10 principles which underpin the strategy
- Exercise 3 covers the five priority themes on which the DHSSPS will act upon
- Exercise 4 is the final exercise and covers equality implications and seeks parent's views on the promotion of equality for all.

Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and the facilitators were chosen accordingly. The focus groups were well attended and parents clearly valued the opportunity to be consulted on issues concerning them with

regards to parenting, local service provision, and the access to parenting support services. They readily contributed their views and their experiences.

## **Consultation Methodology**

***A consultation pack was designed to ensure a uniform approach in collecting and collating the views of parents.***

The pack included information for parents on the purpose of the 'Families Matter' consultation and how the information collated will help the Family Policy Unit continue to consider how best to assist parents in Northern Ireland in implementing the detailed initiatives and actions outlined within the Families Matter document.

User-friendly materials were designed in order to present to parents with questions on service provision on which their views were being sought. Focus groups were chosen as the data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their views and identify issues both of individual and common concern. They also made effective use of the resources available. Existing support groups/networks were approached with a view to becoming involved. The Parenting Forum NI was aware at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents was consulted and therefore groups consulted covered representation of all areas of Section 75

***Quantitative information was collected from the parents. 144 parents were consulted and these parents cared for a total of 276 children. The focus groups were held at a time that would most suit the parents. Transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.***

The parents, which proceeded, were located as follows:

Barnardos Parent Support Group, Newtownabbey  
Multi-Cultural Centre, Belfast  
Shepherd View, Londonderry  
Cathedral Nursery School Parent Group, Belfast  
Parenteen, Young Persons Project, Craigavon  
Parents Advice Centre (Regional) including The Men's Project  
Gold SureStart, Parent Group, Cookstown  
Womens Voice with representatives from NCH, Londonderry

Orana SureStart, Parent Group, Newry  
YMCA, Lisburn  
Ardess Parent Group, with representative from Mothers Union and  
Erne Family Centre, Enniskillen  
Cookstown Womens Aid  
Armagh Parent Group with representatives from Mothers Union  
and local PAPA group, Dungannon  
Armoy Parent and Toddler Group  
In addition the Parents Advisory Group were invited to take part in  
the consultation exercise by the Office of the First Minister and  
Deputy Minister.

The facilitator compiled this report based on the four exercises  
carried out. The responses were analysed by the Parenting Forum  
NI and they are responsible for writing this report, which presents  
the views of parents both quantitatively and qualitatively.

## **Parent Focus Groups: The Findings**

**Exercise 1 was designed to find out what parents thoughts were on the vision and aim as detailed in consultation document 'Families Matter'**

The Vision is: 'Children and young people are valued during childhood. Children and young people reach their potential and have the opportunity to lead full, healthy and satisfying lives by becoming active contributors to their community through participating socially, educationally and economically in the life of the community' (see Families Matter Document Page 9)

Parents were asked the question: **Do you agree that this is a good vision?**

Following discussion the general agreement from focus groups consulted are that most parents agree with the vision. Comments provided about the wording of the vision is that whilst it is aspirational and does cover a lot of ground it is also 'very wordy and hard to understand.' Concerns were raised that it is too idealist because 'neither parents or their children have reached or will reach their full potential'

The second part of this exercise covered the aim of the strategy. The aim is 'to create confident, responsible and empowered parents, through access to support and information: to develop the ability and skills of parents and to support their children so that they can reach their full potential and become active citizens within their community and society' (see Report Page 9)

In answer to the question: **Do you agree with the aims?**

Parents considered that the aim overall is good. Similar comments to the vision were made about the aim in that it is again aspirational and idealistic. The aim is attempting to cover all families but it is considered by parents that this is not the case with a need to recognise the different needs of families and children. A further concern raised is about at what stage of family life will the aim start to provide the support required.

The final question posed was: **Do you want to add anything/what would you change for the vision or aim?**

Whilst it is acknowledged within the aim the need to 'empower parents' this could be changed and linked to a later part of the statement aim and read.... 'to develop the ability and skills empowering parents and to support their children so that they can reach their full potential'

It is recommended that information and knowledge should begin at school informing how and when a parent you access support, information and training.

Training for parents should be included within the aim where it states ..... 'through access to support and information'. As one parent stated 'If I had known what I know now I would have done things differently as a parent'.

**The second exercise was designed to find out what parents thoughts were on the 10 principles outlined which underpin the document**

Parents participating discussed in small groups each principle and decided after dialogue whether they agreed or disagreed with the principle with supporting comments.

**That children and young people are safe and secure**

Agree

- There are today a lot of risks around for children and they need protected.
- A joint effort in partnership with parents and all relevant statutory and voluntary groups within the local community is required
- Help parent to develop own skills to help to keep children safe and secure
- Provide more help for parents to understand how to use the internet and protect their children.
- When the media promotes dangers for children it causes parents to become over anxious.
- It is not always possible to predict what will happen; Children do need 'some freedom - to take risk'.
- Schools and local clubs should work together more, to let the child feel involved out of school.

Disagree

- Domestic violence can take away a safe and secure environment for children
- Are POCVA worth anything and are all people checked enough?

**Approaches to developing policies and services for children and young people should cover all aspects of their lives and involve all groups to make this possible.**

Agree

- It should be a priority to support and provide information for helping parents develop their skills
- This is a good principle. Children need to be told what is available for them but how practical will this be to implement?
- Consultation should be accessible and needs to take place all the time and it should be a two-way process.
- A holistic approach is essential for strategy to work. Why has this not been clear before?
- Promote parenting classes within primary and secondary education
- Parents should be involved, give them real choices and support them to stay at home with their children if they wish.
- It should be noted that for 'looked after children', 16 is the age when accommodation provided could be an issue. It is not appropriate to place a 16 year old with homeless people just because there may be a lack of available resources.
- If you are a parent and you are under 16 years of age then the grandparents will be required to give parental permission instead of the young parent.
- Mental health issues need a high profile. When over 16 you may not get the support required from social services.
- Parents would be able to provide a realistic view for policy development to ensure that children's rights are adhered to.
- The media is responsible for changing opinions on family life today. Family principles should be valued and protected. Within a complex society where certain values have broken down they can't be fixed merely by government initiatives.

Disagree

- Often children aren't consulted and their voice is not heard

**The needs and perspectives of the children and families are used to inform planning and service delivery decisions.**

Agree

- When introducing change, pilot things first to ensure that it is done properly.
- Access parents views on an on going basis.
- Education will need to help our children to be fit for future roles in the community. Therefore bring the business role into education in order to develop children further.
- Ensure that this is culturally relevant, with room for innovation at a regional and national level.
- Children are being placed in care, which may not be the best choice for them and more damage can be done which will need to be fixed at a later stage.
- At present parents sometimes have to do battle on behalf of their child particularly when it comes to getting access to professionals. More should be done to address the gaps in provision such as access to speech therapist and early diagnosis for a child requiring assistance.

Disagree

- No comment provided however there is a caveat in that parents have got questions

**Policy development and planning decisions should be based on evidence**

Agree

- The evidence should be based on best practice, in fact all of the principles need to start with this.
- Before change are made listen to the voice of parents
- Government need to know first what parent's require they know their children best.

Disagree

- No need for 'new evidence' we have plenty and anyway in the past the evidence was not necessarily acted on.

- Unsure that all are listened to when gathering evidence

**The evaluation of what services have been put in place should be open and transparent to all**

Agree

- There is a need for more accountability; the evaluation requires input from parents, government and local authorities.
- We need to know how things have been evaluated so we can make informed decisions about services we use.
- Target new and existing services which need an influx of money.
- To be effective regular information sharing and co-operation is required.
- More government funding for a lot more workshops to provide parents with opportunity to participate in evaluation of services.
- At present there appears to be a length of time before a child's condition is diagnosed. When diagnosis is being made parents complete perhaps a questionnaire. This could act as an evaluation of support provided to child awaiting diagnosis and what more could be done during this interim period.
- Service provision needs more clarity. Parents may consider that their child requires further help but question if it will be offered 'as a parent I've been told that now my child is at high school she will not be receiving any more speech and language support so now even though I can't afford it I pay for elocution lessons to support her'

Disagree

- This is a woolly statement which means nothing at all it is too generic.
- Research and evaluation may be done at wrong time.

**Innovation and creativity in developing policy should be valued further.**

Agree

- Whilst there is general agreement that we need to do this how this is approached and promoted is important because this principle could be seen as 'very idealistic thinking'.
- It is important to think outside the box sometimes and to be open to change and different approaches with a financial budget in place to support this.
- Vital to listen to parents and start the change involving the voice of parents.
- Innovation and creativity will be demonstrated by including views of parents and children alongside voluntary and community groups.
- Creativity and innovation are good as long as it is balanced with the tried and tested or the traditional. There is a need to value established policy and practice.
- Encourage creativity in school to develop a 'can do' attitude
- Informed decisions - government needs to know what we need. The theory is good but will only work if finance is in place to gain evidence prior to planning and policy decisions being made.

Disagree

- Some services are tried and tested so should not be changed.
- Being creative and innovative does not always work

**Encourage all stakeholders, statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to work together in partnership, especially in participation and collaboration with children, young people and their families.**

Agree

- Training and partnership is the key for this principle.

- For too long we have all been in a 'bubble' and not connecting with other relevant bodies. We should know what other agencies could provide for children and young people.
- A united approach is what is required with resources in place to ensure this happens.
- This principle will need to be supported, monitored and evaluated to ensure parents and children can have their say.
- Work together but bear in mind that parents are children's main educators.
- Confidence building for parents required

### Disagree

- Cannot step out of established communication systems. Very few links at present for communication channels between services.
- Good concept but impossible to achieve this is 'pie in the sky' thinking.
- Bear in mind that it is not only socially deprived areas, which require support when raising a family.

### **Encourage communities to have a say in the design and delivery of services**

#### Agree

- It is important that government don't make promises they can't keep i.e. Budget in place which doesn't match decision
- Need people in community to co-ordinate this to network across all bodies, all denominations, community centres, and schools. It is the local community who know what is needed.
- Provide funding for trainers e.g. parent facilitators
- Rural communities are lacking in services and this needs to be addressed.

- Young people do not have enough facilities within their local community to further their potential in sports and also to keep them occupied and off the streets.
- Lone parents and families on low income find it difficult to encourage their children to remain within clubs, which require a weekly subscription or expensive kit to be part of the team.
- Communities are not always geographic. Sometimes they may be formed by a shared interest e.g. disability issues, ethnic communities. More will need to be done to ensure how to access opinion of all types of communities within in Northern Ireland.
- Address mental health issues for children and young people. Waiting lists are too long, we need to prevent children attempting suicide and it is vital to speed up access to help when they need it most.
- One parent reports 'We have family private medical insurance but I can't access the support my child needs because I can't locate a private child psychologist in Northern Ireland'

#### Disagree

- What about those that do not know what they need or want, as they are unaware of what services exist?

### **Promote involvement by everyone through developing strong families and communities and services to prevent children being affected by discrimination and/or economic and social disadvantage.**

#### Agree

- Family values shape a child's perception as will the influence of their peers.
- Parenting classes for all as an integrated part of school education because this will provide a basis to draw on when becoming a parent.
- Agree, one place you could go to for help and information would be good, parents are embarrassed about needing help, and families in danger of becoming isolated.

- Working parents are concerned that sometimes they are obliged to pay for services to support their child, which would not be the case if they were in receipt of benefits.
- Participation helps empower parents and children to make right choices.
- Promotion equals growth!
- Provide equality of service to everyone.
- Often today homework is set which requires access to the internet which is not available in the home setting for all families and it is not enough to assume you can go to local library instead. Provide homework clubs within school setting to allow all children to access the internet.
- Life skills classes for all children at each stage of their lives.

#### Disagree

- The government alone can't develop a strong family. As has been stated by various people 'it takes a whole community to raise a child'
- Communities are being let down with the closure of local schools

#### **Provide services that will empower and promote the independence of children, young people and their families enabling communities to help themselves**

#### Agree

- At present parents have to do battle sometimes on behalf of their child particularly when it comes to getting access to professionals.
- More should be done to address the gaps in provision such as access to speech therapist and early diagnosis for a child requiring assistance.
- Everyone's opinion counts. Who will be consulted and what evaluation process will be put in place?

#### Disagree

- No comment provided however there is a caveat parents have got questions

**The third exercise was designed to find out what parents views are on the priority themes and proposed actions. Parents were requested to indicate if they agreed, disagreed or didn't know about a proposed themed action. Below are the quantitative and qualitative responses.**

Priority Theme One - Parental Support

**Action: Promote awareness of the role of health visitors through initiative such as Sure Start, Parenting Education and Positive Parenting**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
92	19	22

Agree

Whilst having a statutory role to play within the community it is important that the health visitor has a positive image and is seen to be approachable, and working in partnership with the local community.

The health visitor is known to provide a universal service, however most parents do not know their full remit or the changing role of the health visitor. The work involves far more than weighing babies and advising on weaning and bed-wetting. If health visitors are not visiting families regularly how will they pick up on problems such as a child development concern or a situation of domestic violence or postnatal depression?

One group mentioned attending a conference for mothers in 2005 on maternal mental health where a 10-point plan was recommended to support mothers during the all-important first year with their child. This information would have included health visitors putting mothers in touch with local support groups. The idea was not taken up but the group believe it could have speeded up the help received by mothers suffering with post-natal depression.

A parent's health is important and will affect the baby if help is not received. One group reported that 'in the Derry area mothers may wait up to a year to receive help for post-natal depression. Extra

support and therapy, including cognitive behaviour therapy should be in place for mothers when they need it.'

### Disagree

Parents are concerned that it can at present be difficult to access a health visitor so question how further promotion will help.

It is considered a disadvantage when a health visitor has no children and therefore no first hand experience of parenting.

Health visitors are under pressure and when visiting the home environment it is easy for them to make assumptions, which may or not be accurate.

One parent shared her feelings 'She always took an interest in my health rather than my child this caused me to be distressed and nervous.'

### Don't Know

Health visitors are already spread too thinly, health visitors are transferring from a general practise base over to Sure Starts.

### How easy is it for you to access your health visitor?

Health visitors have a very wide remit which only a few parents commented upon. The majority of parents at the consultations considered that a health visitor is available for their baby until the child reaches the age of four or goes to school.

The majority of parents have voiced their concerns about the changing role of the health visitor. To ensure a successful outcome of support a relationship needs to be built upon between parent and health visitor. Fathers are parents too and the health visitor should be developing a relationship with all parents. It is vital for communities and families that the health visitor is more readily available and more will need to be done to recruit health visitors if their role is to be promoted through various agencies.

It is particularly important to convey the difficulties that ethnic minority parents encounter particularly when moving to Northern Ireland and when English is a second language. As one parent explained 'if you don't know what the role of the health visitor is and you receive a letter to your home saying that the health visitor is going to call you worry. Are your abilities as a parent being questioned by someone in authority?' It is important that health

visitors have training on how best to support all parents within the community.

Whilst the majority of parents with younger children would know their health visitor a lot can depend on where the health visitor is based and how workload is approached. One mother's recent experience is of no continuity of care with at least four health visitors being allocated from the local surgery to provide support during the child's first year.

One parent shared how when her child was under the care of a consultant it was the health visitor who was the 'go between for parent and consultant' providing support and taking the time to explain what the consultant had recommended for child in terms that the parent could understand.

Below are a few of the most common statements which parents expressed about their health visitor:

'My health visitor helped me in ways I didn't know that she could.'  
'You see them when you need to and you couldn't do without them.'

#### Where else could parents hear about the role of the health visitor?

General consideration is that whilst the role of the health visitor should be promoted there are reservations because as pointed out by one group there is 'no point publicising a service if it is not going to be reliable and managed properly.'

To provide continuity there will need to be reliable access with ensured standards underpinning all requirements for this role. Promotion of the service could be expanded within playgroups, schools and hospital.

**Action: We will work with statutory, voluntary and community sector partners to establish nine new Sure Start projects across the province by April 2008**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
98	4	31

Agree

Parents who had accessed their local Sure Start stated that they had benefited from the experiences and support the initiative. The difference that Sure Starts make is invaluable and should not be under estimated. The need to expand and promote Sure Start throughout Northern Ireland was raised as not all areas have one and there was confusion as to who could access the services . The perception among some parents was that unless they are receiving some type of income support then they can't participate with a Sure Start initiative. One mother shared that she wrongly assumed 'that if you were a working mother you were not entitled to be part of your local Sure Start'.

Disagree

Parents had concerns around the expansion of Sure Start stating that it failed to meet the needs of all parents. Access to services from 9am – 5pm disqualified some working parents who would benefit from availing of the services. Another key concern was the patch work and postcode lottery in accessing services which left many parents feeling disadvantaged some stating that they felt like the 'haves and have not'.

Other parents questioned the emphasis on Sure Start to the detriment of local groups providing support services to families which also need to be promoted and financed. One parent quoted the research in England that did not generally provide favourable evidence on the success of these initiatives. Parents felt that it was important to have the choice through a range of locally provided service.

Parents of older children stated that they also require similar services that Sure Start offer. By funding more Sure Start initiatives they questioned if funding would be available to meet their needs.

Don't Know

Where is the evidence that existing Sure Starts work? A lot will depend on quality of provision.

Do you attend a Sure Start yourself?

Many parents who attend Sure Start have positive experiences. The benefits extended beyond the remit of the services provided. Many parents stated having increased confidence and reduced isolation. Experiences parents shared included:

‘through attending my local Sure Start and receiving support from the health visitor I have been able to breastfeed my baby.’

“My horizons changed and this has led me to continue education. I have recently attended a First Aid course through Sure Start”.

“By attending Sure Start parents meet up with others in the community from all walks of life and have the opportunity to form new friendships”

Positive Parenting

**Action: By April 2008 positive parenting classes will increase to support parents in developing alternatives to physical punishment and anger management.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
113	0	20

**Action: T.V. ads and billboards and other forms of media promotion will form part of an information campaign to increase awareness about ways to discipline children without smacking.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
88	19	26

### Agree

Parents stated that a campaign would be good if it raised awareness and was approached in the right way. Messages need to be clear, non judgemental and unambiguous if they are to have a positive impact. One group stated that 'If it can affect us positively and approached in right way then any advice is better than none, however it is important to consult with parents first'.

The majority of parents expressed that it would be helpful to provide awareness of alternatives to disciplining children without smacking. Although it should be noted that a few parents consulted expressed that a tap administered to their child on occasion when they misbehaved 'didn't do them any harm.' Many stated that whilst the adverts raise awareness they need to be supported with tools and services delivered at a local level.

Some stated that T.V. is 'in your face' and most of us watch it therefore it would be hard not to receive the information. The NSPCC adverts are very effective and stay in your mind.

### Disagree

Some felt that it would be too expensive to fund.

### Don't Know

Some parents felt that initiatives at a local level would make better use of money. The wording of an advertisement would be crucial because otherwise parents may not listen anyway. Messages which are judgemental and unclear may make parents feel that they are "not doing a good enough job".

**Action: The law on physical punishment in the home has just been changed. The defence of reasonable chastisement will only be available on a charge of common assault. Guidance will be issued to professional groups on the change of law and the importance of promoting positive parenting initiatives.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
123	0	10

Agree

Parents stated that they need to know the current law because at present this appears to be 'a grey area.' Many had questions around the issue of smacking a child asking "Where do you draw the line if choosing to smack your child?" Parents felt that they need a definition of what physical abuse or punishment is and that everyone both parents and professionals need access to information to ensure child protection.

Many parents felt they needed to know other ways to manage a child's behaviour which will empower parents to use alternative methods.

Don't Know

'Reasonable chastisement' parents need this term clarified.

Parenting Education

**Action: We will support parents by increasing the provision of parenting education programmes to assist with child health and development, household management, and stress management by April 2008**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
124	0	9

## Agree

Parents felt this was important in that increasing the provision of parenting education programmes was key to supporting them to make informed choices and become more confident and able parents. Programmes should be well thought through with support for educational needs and in a language people understand. The difficulty of choosing the right programme was stated with many acknowledging that all parenting programmes need to be underpinned by some level of quality.

Parent stated that parenting programmes need to be universal and offered to all to eliminate the stigma so that attendance would be accepted as par for the course. Parenting programmes should be linked to existing support services. Generic courses should be offered to all with specialist issue based courses offered to those who need them. Those with the right skills 'specialists' should be recruited to deliver courses such as benefits and debt managements.

The issue of where and when parenting programmes should begin was raised many feeling it should be part of the school curriculum to raise young people's awareness. Many felt that programmes should begin at anti-natal classes and continue through out the child's life.

Attendance at programmes needs to be supported with childcare which is age specific and travel particularly in rural areas. One suggestion is for government to finance a voucher scheme for parents to present in exchange for local childcare. Mornings during term time may suit parents with younger children but to reach all parents courses would also need to be available in the evening and at weekends.

## Don't Know

Unless fathers and mothers attend together it could be the same of pattern of mainly women participating

## Where would suit you best?

Different setting were suggested such as community centres,

health centres and schools which provide a neutral venue and are accessible to all. The living room was suggested perhaps a little tongue in cheek although this could work if neighbours, family and friends came together. Venues where childcare facilities are provided would be the best as parents would be more likely to attend classes if this facility was available. As one parent commented 'I would attend classes however I have too many kids and would find it hard to make the time'

**Action: We will explore the development of quality standards framework with the intention to implement generic standards for all service providers by April 2008**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
133	0	0

Agree

Knowing which programme to attend or service to avail of was a concern for many parents. Some state "how do we know it will be right". Crucial to success of programmes is that the course has a high level of quality and is accredited to ensure the confidence of parents. Parents felt that quality standards are a key way of ensuring confidence in making the right choice. Some parents stated that support should be made available for small organisation to become accredited and to use the standards. Some stated that guidelines should be provided for professionals facilitating programmes which should include the inclusion of peer-to-peer support.

Disagree / Don't Know

As parents were in agreement no comments were made.

## Family Mediation

**Action: We will continue to work with the Office of Law Reform the NI Court Service and the Legal Services Commission in highlighting the importance of mediation prior to seeking resolution through the Court.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
125	8	0

### Agree

Parents stated that there should not only be a court mediation service but that there should be a range of providers who are available as early as possible. This should be a personal choice and would require extra resources and trained mediators. Some stated that strong measures are required to protect women and children affected by domestic violence and psychological abuse perhaps they would prefer to opt out of process. Older children's views should be taken into consideration in making decisions on the outcomes from mediation.

Many parents highlighted the cost of availing of the service and felt that this should not be passed on to them as it will become a barrier to access. Some felt that when left in lawyer's hands the costs can spiral and this causes further distress when you are already in emotional trauma and financially under pressure.

### Disagree

If couples cannot be reasonable or if the relationship is abusive then this may not be the correct approach.

### Relationship Support

**Action: We will continue to work in partnership with voluntary/community groups to support families by providing relationship advice and counselling**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
124	6	3

#### Agree

Relationship advice should be provided at point of immediate need and be consistent otherwise there will be no point to the meetings. It needs to become accepted and the 'norm' for couples to receive relationship counselling. However not all couples will want to enter into this. It should be noted that when the relationship has finished then it will not be repairable.

Several groups considered that Parents Advice Centre could provide the support and resources to enable parents to work together and take children's needs into account.

#### Disagree

Unless the couple attend counselling together this would not work.

#### Don't Know

At present a lot needs to be done to provide relationship advice and counselling for all who need it.

#### Will couples facing divorce be helped by having access to a relationship advisor?

This may help smooth the way for the couple and should certainly benefit the children. Access to a relationship advisor is expensive and more needs to be done to train staff who work with parents to be able to offer this service at a local level at an affordable price.

## Child Contact Centres

**Action: We will work with the Office of Law Reform in the development and expansion of Child Contact Centres by April 2008**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
112	3	18

### Agree

Many parents were in agreement that there should be an expansion of Child Contact Centres in order that separated parents have regular access to their child(ren). The centres if developed in local communities could provide a safe and family friendly place to maintain a relationship with the child providing an alternative to Mc Donald's or the library. This services should be made available to all parents separating and not just targeted at supported parents.

It was suggested that Child Contact Centres may only be applicable for a very short time when the couple separating until access to children was agreed.

### Disagree

Some times even this environment proves too stressful for a child

### Don't Know

This is not a solution which will work for all separated parents and children

**Action: To have a Regional Information Website by April 2010 so that parents and professionals can readily access information on services available and to assist with timely referrals.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
124	0	9

### Agree

One group expressed that the deadline should be brought forward from April 2010, because this is the gateway to information. It was requested that it should not be a Health Board but an independent organisation providing this service because this should be more than a medical model. The site needs to be easy to navigate and should be interactive.

Parents felt that access to the internet is common now and even if you do not have access to a computer at home then you can go to the local library. The web site requires an e-mail facility and should be independent at the start.

### Don't Know

Some parents felt it was only good if parents have access to the website and not everyone has a computer. A website will not work for all unless it takes account of individuals with special needs i.e. certain disabilities, English as a second language and those who require literacy support.

**Action: Provide a regional help-line by June 2007 for parents to obtain advice and support at a time when they need it.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
132	0	1

Agree

Many welcomed the introduction of the Regional Help-line with four groups asking why was this being considered when Parents Advice Centre free phone is available and suggested that it made more sense to fund existing services. Parents suggested that it should be clear what issues the help line will deal with. This service should not provide crisis intervention but would require adequate resources in order to take referrals and promote services so that all parents are aware that it exists.

When issues arise that the help line does not deal with this needs to be signposted to other more specialist services. These also need to be funded and resourced to meet the increasing demands. One parent gave an example of a breast feeding mother feeling overwhelmed who was signposted to the relevant organisation who could then provide the required knowledge and support.

Many parents felt that this was a good start but needs to be backed up by services available at a local level.

A concern was raised that if the regional help-line is contacted out to private organisation there could be a loss of quality standards.

Don't Know

Some felt that one help-line cannot do everything. Parents may not understand what service is for nor that it exists.

When would you use it?

The common response to using a help-line is 'only when I need it'. More needs to be done to take away the stigma of seeking help and to widely promote this service for parents and professionals.

What time would suit you to access the help-line, should it be a 24 hour help-line?

9.00am to 9.00pm is the most popular choice of parents on Monday to Friday with a suggestion of 9.00 to 2.00pm on a Saturday.

Although 24 hours is an option which parents discussed overall the most common time slot which parents indicated they would use the service is in the evening up to 10.00pm.

**Action: A common assessment form will be introduced throughout Northern Ireland by April 2007. This will help ensure the progress for children and families to have their needs matched to the services required.**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
104	10	19

#### Agree

Parents were in agreement of having one system which would speed up the process to access services quickly for their child. There was a general consensus by groups that it is good for parents not to have to repeat information to different professionals their child is in contact with over and over again. However concerns were raised as to the time professionals would need to complete the form; how confidentiality would be insured and which professional body would take responsibility of the collated information?

It was felt that training will be required for all those using assessment form including the voluntary/community sector. Once the form was completed services need to be in place to follow up on what is needed.

#### Disagree

Those who were unsure also questioned who will have access to form and how long is the professional going to be filling out form and not getting work done?

#### Don't Know

There are many of questions which parents have which need to be addressed below are some of the main queries:

What about mistakes or required changes?

What happens to information?

How will information be confidential if stored on computer?

Most importantly who will take ultimate responsibility?

**Action: Statutory, voluntary and community sector will work together to provide the help for parents at an early stage of referral**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
116	1	16

Agree

Many felt that this is long overdue, parents have been struggling to cope and sometimes the referral process takes to long. A joined up thinking and approach is the way forward. Support should be available as soon as possible from the appropriate person.

Disagree

Will this be workable who will co-ordinate services?

Don't Know

Isn't this supposed to be happening already?

**Action: We will develop and implement new Children's Information Protocols for Northern Ireland by April 2008**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
123	0	10

### Agree

Whilst parents felt that this is a good ideal to promote a holistic approach and recognise the importance for everyone to communicate they felt that this is information needs to be protected and should only be shared on a need to know basis only. There are implications as to who shares this information. Access to information usually means that there are layers of information over and above the medical information.

### Don't Know

Professionals need guidelines but will they receive the information and use it.

**Action: We will establish 6 new Children's Centres based within existing Sure Start networks by April 2008 allowing parents to gain access to a wide range of services in a way that is convenient for families and protect agencies working together for the benefit of children**

Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
113	0	20

### Agree

Parents welcomed Children's Centres and saw them as being beneficial in providing a one stop shop to the provision of services. Many stated that the centres would need to be placed to incorporate geographic and universal needs. Some raised the question of only six centres as there is a need for more of this type of provision especially as England have more. They sited community centres, healthy living centres, women's centres where a parent room was available as another alternative.

### Don't Know

Parents questioned why other existing local services are not being considered. The Sure Start remit only covers children up to the age of 4 but children require support after this and more needs to be done to support families throughout the child life. If based in a Sure Start would parents of older children know of the services and be able to access them.

Some parents referred to their original concerns about Sure Start and if difficulties in accessing services for under 4 exist would they also come into play by situating the Child Centre's only in Sure Start settings.

**The fourth and final exercise was designed to gather parent's views in relation to the families matter document proposed actions to ensure promotion of equality for all.**

In response to the question: **Do you consider that the actions covered in Families Matters will ensure all families will be able**

## **to access services and information and not cause any group of people to be at a disadvantage?**

Below are groupings covered in relation to equality impacts:

### **Age**

If you are a parent and you are under 16 years of age then the grandparents will be required to give parental permission instead of the young parent. This takes away from the mother the opportunity to be the parent, to be fully involved and to take the lead. In addition young mother's who have an allocated social worker report that when a commitment to provide a support service is given that doesn't mean it will happen. Often the reason given for this is lack of time/money/staff.

The strategy will need to include provision of support services for children and young people who are carers for a family member. Mental health issues are not being addressed quickly enough when children need help. Parents are concerned that children are not able to access the help when they need it most.

### **Disability**

It is not clear from the proposed actions stated within Families Matter document what provision will be made for parents and children with a disability to ensure that they are fully supported with access to information and services. From the parents consulted within the focus groups that have personal experience of access to services for a child with disability the overwhelming opinion is that more needs to be done to support parents in accessing specialist help their child may need. Waiting lists are in place, some services are not available or easily accessible. Parents consider that they usually have a fight on their hands to ensure that they are heard and progress is made for their child. Some of the issues are on going and have to be pursued vigorously and over a considerable amount of time sometimes years by the parent.

### **Gender**

Two areas of concern were voiced with regards to gender the first is that it is important to look at how promotion is provided for same sex relationships.

The second recommendations are that fathers will be given as much opportunity to give opinions and have access to information.

Whilst promotion of parenting programmes is generally considered by parents to be a good idea there is a concern that it will continue to be mothers who will be high attendees of such courses and not fathers. More will need to be done to understand what approaches will be the most beneficial for fathers.

#### Racial Group

Travellers, ethnic groups are two groups which will need accessible information. This will need to be widely promoted. For parents whose second language is English interpreters may be needed. Parents do not always understand what is available and how to access services.

#### Religious Belief

One father stated that at his child's school not enough is being done for his children and other children who are Muslim during school assembly. It is important to ensure that religious differences are celebrated and are part of the school curriculum.

#### Political opinion

It is felt that political opinion should not be allowed to have a bearing on what services families are offered or required.

#### Household Status

Service provision should not be based on household income. Lone parents are often aware of local provision of after school clubs and would appreciate the opportunity for their child to attend. It is often financial restraints which prohibit child from attending either the weekly subscription required or the cost of a kit i.e. football kit when in local club.

Rural areas requiring travel to services such as hospital appointments means that travel can be expensive and parents are disadvantaged when accessing services.

In response to the final question: **Do you have any other comments, which you think might be relevant to the development of the strategy?**

One suggestion for this strategy is that it needs to ensure more practical support for parents who are vulnerable. One area

highlighted is when there is a new baby in the family there is a need to provide better maternity leave (at least full pay for a year). Another suggestion is to provide practical home help support, with flexible hours (like Netherlands where dad and mum can take day off a week to support their children).

There is a concern that access to local Sure Start is on a proviso of a geographical element consisting of postcodes resulting in a postcode lottery with regards to accessing Sure Start initiative. It is recommended that there is more flexibility for accessing services provided within Sure Start.

## Conclusions

The Parenting Forum NI has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on support and information for parents and how to ensure that families access the support they require to feed into the work of the Family Policy Unit housed within the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The organisation is in a unique position to carry out such consultation because of its links with a huge network of parents and parent support groups throughout Northern Ireland. From the fifteen consultation groups with parents, one hundred and forty four parents were consulted and of these a total of two hundred and seventy six children are cared for. The required mix of parents to cover Section 75 was met. This was ensured by selecting and joining together parents situated in areas across the whole spectrum e.g. Sure Start groups and groups both in rural and urban location.

The consultation has provided a range of useful information. The views of parents in areas of deprivation did not seem to differ from those in less deprived areas.

The majority of parents have voiced their concerns about the changing role of the health visitor. It is vital for communities and families that the health visitor is more readily available and more will need to be done to recruit health visitors if their role is to be promoted through various agencies.

The wider role of the health visitor is not known widely by parents, the majority of parents consulted would only consult their health visitor until their child started school. To provide continuity there will need to be reliable access with ensured standards promotion of the service should be in schools, play groups and hospital.

Whilst the majority of parents are in agreement with the promotion of further Sure Start there is concern that not all parents will be able to access these services. Whilst Sure Start has made a positive contribution within the local community there are other agencies within a community which could be supported and linked to services within Sure Start or provide alternatives.

Positive parenting overall is perceived by parents to provide support and understanding to implementing strategies in how to cope with the challenges of being a parent today. It is through re-education that parents are able to have more choices and to learn different approaches, which work better and more effectively than the cycle of 'shouting at' and 'smacking' a child.

The law on physical punishment in the home is not well known by parents and it is viewed as a grey area. This law needs to be well promoted and provide clarity on the term reasonable chastisement. This will need to be well thought through and in a user-friendly language that people will understand.

Parenting Education could be linked to existing parenting programmes and should provide generic parenting course as well as specialised issued based education. General comment is that more needs to be done to enable fathers to be included in the classes. Provision of childcare will increase the uptake of parents participating. It is crucial to the success of a parenting programme that a course is of a high standard with quality provision and guidelines in place which will protect parent and staff because a bad parenting programme which is unsupported and unregulated will do a lot of damage.

Family mediation should be accessed as early as possible and be available through a range of services. Government will need to provide extra resources for training and increase trained mediators. When couples fail to be reasonable or if the relationship is abusive then mediation may not be appropriate.

Relationship support through a relationship advisor should be provided at point of immediate need. Couples however do not always want to recognise or accept that they have a problem and may not seek the help available at an early pre-crisis stage. Counselling may help smooth the way for a couple and should certainly benefit the children but it is at present expensive to access counselling and even if parent is on a low income there could be a requirement to contribute financially for each session received. A suggestion put forward was that local groups identify someone on the ground who could receive finance to participate in counselling training and then be available to provide this at a reasonable cost?

At present there are not enough child centres and many are run on financial shoestring. It is recommended to expand the provision to ensure separated parents are helped to have regular access to their child. Local communities could develop these services with government assistance.

The centres may only be applicable for a very short time and could be curtailed if other service provision through early intervention such as mediation is more widely available.

A Regional Information Website would provide useful information on services if it is regularly updated, is interesting and easy to use. It should be noted that not all parents will have regular access to the internet and would be at a disadvantage.

A Regional Help-Line for parents to obtain advice and support would require adequate resources it has been recommended by parents that Parents Advice Centre could be the right organisation to provide this service. They have the knowledge and expertise to ensure consistent standards and provision are maintained and could ensure a high quality service with trained parent volunteers.

The new common assessment form being introduced is in principle a good idea if it speeds up access for services. There is a need to ensure that training is provided for all sectors including voluntary and community sector. Concerns around confidentiality have been raised. Who will have ultimate responsibility of a form, where will it be stored? Information protocols are required to ensure that information is protected and only shared on a need to know basis.

Six new Children's Centre based within existing Sure Start networks would be able to provide a one stop shop which would be beneficial. However there should be provision to support more parents particularly with older children perhaps by providing a parent room in community centre or healthy living centre, waiting room in hospital or libraries. The centres will need to be placed to incorporate geographic and universal needs.

Parents question why other existing local services are not being considered for expansion. Sure Starts remit only covers children up to the age of 4 but children require support after this and more needs to be done to support families throughout the child's life.

In conclusion whilst overall parents are in general agreement with the vision, aim, principles and themes with proposed actions

documented in 'Families Matter' there are common concerns which have been raised and documented. Services and information will only improve with government promotion and resources in place on a long-term bases.