

Every Child Matters

A joint response from Family Rights Group, Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus

Introduction

Family Rights Group, the Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus welcome this opportunity to comment on the Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, and we look forward to further opportunities to participate in the development and implementation of its proposals. All three organisations carry out research and lobby for change in policy and services for parents, carers and children, and we are all established service providers, working with different but overlapping groups of service users.

Family Rights Group provides a telephone advice service and undertakes projects, which develop policy and practice for families, predominantly those involved with social services and the care system. It aims to increase the voice and influence families have over the services they use and lobbies for improvements to the legal process for children and families, an increase in families' influence on decisions, the involvement of the wider family in decision-making and a right to advocacy for families subject to administrative decision-making.

The Family Welfare Association provides a range of home and project-based support to very vulnerable and excluded families and operates a grant scheme that gives 6,000 grants each year to individuals who have fallen through the safety net of the welfare state. It aims to help family members, whether living together or apart, to plan and control their lives and build more secure futures.

Parentline Plus operates a free telephone helpline on any parenting concern, runs parenting workshops and courses, produces information material and a website and is currently piloting an email helpline service. It lobbies for interventions that invest in parenting and families rather than rescuing children, accepting that all parents have difficulties from time to time.

Although our particular concerns and focuses differ, together we demonstrate a rounded appreciation of the challenges facing parents as well as clear, evidence-based solutions.

This response

Five principles emerge from our work and experience and underlie this response:

- **To improve outcomes for children and young people it is vital to invest in their families;**
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- **Statutory agencies should work in partnership with families, supporting families taking the lead in making decisions about their own children, including those at risk;**
- **If services are to be appropriate and effective, parents and children must be able to influence the policy agenda locally and nationally as well as service development and delivery;**
- **Parents and carers must be able to assume that they are entitled to information and support if they need it or want it; and**
- **Poverty makes parenting harder. Rather than acting as a foundation for broader strategies advancing children and families' health and well-being, the child poverty strategy must be integrated into them.**

We welcome the Green Paper's setting five key outcomes, informed by what matters most to children and families, and trust that these will be explicit aims against which proposals, implementation, practice and delivery are measured:

1. **Being healthy:** enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle
2. **Staying safe:** being protected from harm and neglect and growing up able to look after themselves
3. **Enjoying and achieving:** getting the most out of life and developing broad skills for adulthood
4. **Making a positive contribution:** to the community and to society and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour
5. **Economic well-being:** overcoming socio-economic disadvantages to achieve their full potential in life

In this response we consider the recommendations contained in the Green Paper and our response as a whole against these outcomes. We make broad comments under each chapter heading as well as, where appropriate, answering the specific questions set out at the end of each chapter. First, we set out our overarching concerns.

What the Green Paper leaves out or fails to emphasise

Working in partnership with families

The Green Paper fails to place sufficient emphasis on the partnership between parents, carers and the state that is required if the outcomes it sets out are to be achieved. Instead, there is too much emphasis on when and in what ways the state should intervene in family life, and how information tracking should be used to identify 'children at risk'. Perhaps unfortunately, the overall tone of the Green Paper gives the impression that parents are regarded as part of the 'problem' rather than as the key part of any solution. The principle of partnership underpins the Children Act 1989 and, given that the Green Paper appears to re-emphasise the core philosophy of this seminal statute, partnership should underpin the approach taken in *Every Child Matters*.

Working in partnership with parents is never more important than at the very time when it can be most difficult to achieve, i.e. when children are at risk and social services are required to make enquiries because of child protection concerns. Almost all children at risk, including those on a child protection register, will remain with their parents or wider family, regardless of whether legal proceedings or other concerns arise. Eighty five per cent of children on child protection registers, for example, are living with their families. Almost always, parents or carers of these children share the desire for positive outcomes for their children. In our view therefore, it needs to be stressed throughout the Green Paper, not just in Chapter 3, that government and parents and carers are *partners*, working together to secure the outcomes we *all* want for our children.

Entitlement

To improve outcomes for children and young people it is vital to invest in their families. The support developed as a result of this investment should be seen as an entitlement for all families to a range of services that are community-based, culturally relevant, timely, and deliver what people want in a respectful way. Support should build on existing family and community resources, not supplant them.

Parents and carers must be able to assume that they are *entitled* to information and support if they need it or want it. If support is presented as an entitlement, the stigma attached to seeking help is removed. It is then easier to target help at those who find it hard to access. Only within a culture of entitlement, will services be seen as enhancing parents' role when things are going well and helping when they are not so good.

Consulting parents as well as children

If services are to be appropriate, effective and meet their needs, parents and children must be able to influence the policy agenda locally and nationally as well as service development and delivery. This is the only way to ensure coherent services to children across the age range who may be experiencing a multiplicity of difficulties.

Meaningful consultation involves far more than simply asking questions about existing plans and proposals. Parents and children must be involved at every stage: situation analysis, design, shaping, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. They must be able to see how services change because they have been involved. This process results in better services and the engagement of children and families *in itself* helps achieve one of the key outcomes of the Green Paper, namely making a positive contribution to the community and society.

The Green Paper makes frequent mention of consulting children, but is largely silent on the need to consult parents and carers too. For example, in Chapter 6, the suggested core content of training for all professionals working with children has one heading covering listening to and involving children and young people (p93), but makes no mention of involving parents and carers. Similarly, Chapter 5 has a section on involving children in developing services (p78), but makes no mention of parents and ways of ensuring that their voices as well as those of children are effectively heard.

Ensuring the involvement of parents as well as children supports, rather than threatens, the delicate triangular relationship between the parents, the child and the state. Parents are unlikely to respect children's rights to participate when they feel that they themselves have never been listened to. A growing body of evidence shows a positive response from parents to children's involvement, as long as they are involved too. If children are listened to, respected, trusted and encouraged to take increasing levels of responsibility outside the home, that approach is more likely to be seen within the family environment as well.

While we welcome the enthusiasm across government for consulting with children, we recommend that examples of good practice nationally and internationally, for example the DfES's Raising Achievement strategy and the work of the Family Welfare Association, Save the Children and UNICEF, are used to ensure that families are involved wherever possible and that their engagement is genuine and effective. This will be a major task, but we believe it is the only way that the ethos of the Green Paper can be reflected in the final agenda for reform.

Family and friends care

We are disappointed that the Green Paper makes no reference to the group of children who cannot live with their parents and are being brought up by relatives or friends. This omission is extraordinary given that, according to Family Rights Group estimates, there could be up to 300,000 children living with a relative or friend at any one time (Richards and Tapsfield, 2003). The Children Act 1989 gives a very clear legislative mandate for family and friends care, requiring local authorities to make arrangements for looked after children to live with a relative or friend unless this would be inconsistent with their welfare. A relative or friend is fostering over 17% of all children living with foster carers in England. The number of children made subject to a residence order as an outcome of care proceedings has risen dramatically in the last few years (Department of Health, 2003) and the overwhelming majority of these will be living with a relative.

Research suggests that family and friend carers are often under considerable stress and, although they are caring for a similar group of children to the whole 'looked after' population, they are generally older, poorer, and in poorer health than stranger foster carers. This is particularly so when carers are grandparents, who are estimated to make up 50% of family and friends carers. Despite relative carers' needs, they are frequently not recognised by service providers and often struggle to obtain the services they need (Richards, 2001).

Family and friends carers are unlike any other group of carers as they provide:

- A home for children who would otherwise come into the care system;
- A permanency option for children leaving the care system; and
- A placement for children in care.

We recommend that family and friends' care is recognised and developed as a distinct care arrangement for children, commanding its own policy, guidance and regulations. The policy and guidance should endorse its value as an alternative provision for children who would otherwise be looked after, as a valid and primary placement and care choice for children already looked after, and as a means of giving children permanency and a family for life.

The Family Welfare Association receives numerous grant applications from grandparents and relatives who want to do their best but are entitled to no statutory support. They save local authorities thousands of pounds a month, but often only survive because of a Family Welfare Association grant and church-funded food parcels. Problems are particularly acute if, for example, a mother dies suddenly and benefits and tax credits are slow to transfer. Family and friends who are prepared to bring up a child who cannot live with or be cared for by their parent/s should be entitled to an allowance that reflects the cost of care. This should not be a discretionary benefit, administered by social services, but a

state benefit, either in the form of an unsupported child element to tax credit, or an improved and expanded guardian's allowance.

In addition, family and friends carers, especially new carers and those taking over the care of a child in an emergency, should be entitled to a range of non maintenance payments to help them meet the day to day costs of raising their young relatives.

Dissonance with *Youth Justice – the next steps*

We are concerned that the government persists in seeing and treating children who commit offences very differently than children who do not commit offences. The outcomes that the government sets out for *all* children in *Every Child Matters*, appear not to apply to children who commit an offence. *Youth Justice – the next steps* proposes a single main sentencing purpose of preventing offending. While it is undeniable that preventing offending will often be compatible with securing the best outcomes for a young person, this will not always be so. There may be times when it could be argued that the best 'treatment' or programme for a young person is one that means the young person may in the short term continue to commit offences. And there may be situations where the dangers of incarcerating a young person must be weighed against the risk of re-offending. In our view, the courts must be able to consider the welfare of the young person and give this some weight. As it stands, they will be not allowed to do this.

We believe it is essential that the youth justice system operate on common principles that are shared by all agencies working with children. The outcomes for children set out in the Green Paper must be shared across all government departments and the aims of the youth justice system and sentencing aims must incorporate these outcomes. The Laming Report highlighted how the absence of an agreed priority to safeguard children's welfare and promote their well-being, to which all agencies subscribe, will leave children at risk and make working together across agencies more problematic.

We raise specific concerns in our separate responses to *Youth Justice – the next steps*, but it is relevant to raise here the proposals for more parenting orders and contracts. Without a planned programme of investment in family and parenting support services and the development of new ways of delivering such support, capacity for parenting orders will always be limited. We also need to be assured that the parenting support services will meet the needs of the most vulnerable families and that such support is offered over and above the kind of parenting programmes proposed in *Every Child Matters*. The danger otherwise would be an unhelpful perception that the only way to get help with immediate and long term family problems is if your child offends.

Chapter 1: The Challenge

No questions listed.

Chapter 2: Strong Foundations

Family poverty

While we welcome the government initiatives to eradicate child poverty, to increase the number of parents in work, to increase financial support for working families and to extend the benefits of Sure Start listed in this chapter, we are concerned that over and above these initiatives the issue of children and particularly of *families* living in poverty is not addressed. For example, two million children live in workless households (Palmer, Rahman and Kenway, 2002). For them and for families on low incomes, there are many obstacles to achieving the outcomes for children in the Green Paper. For example, the Family Welfare Association regularly funds beds for school age children who are sleeping two or three to a bed and are therefore not ready for school.

The link at strategic level between the Green Paper's proposals and wider initiatives on poverty, public health, employment opportunities, neighbourhood renewal and the development of leisure and recreational activities is unclear. How, for example, is the existing child poverty strategy to be integrated into the strategy set out to achieve the five outcomes, one of them economic well-being, in the Green Paper? Similarly with education, if the Green Paper's outcomes on economic well-being, getting the most out of life and developing broad skills for adulthood are to be achieved, policy on children, families, poverty and education must be integrated.

Integrated policy development must take into account:

- Child poverty, measured in terms of benefit receipt, varies hugely by area across the United Kingdom (Bradshaw, 2002);
- If children's social exclusion is measured separately from that of their parents, family poverty may be masked (Ridge, 2002). Parents, particularly mothers, strive to protect their children from poverty in families living on low incomes and any improvement in families living standards is found to benefit children first (Farrell and O'Connor, 2003). Therefore, increasing family incomes is an effective way of reducing child poverty;
- Children try to protect their parents. In our experience, children are active agents in managing family poverty, hiding letters from school requesting money for outings or materials, for example. This denies these children a

truly inclusive education and excludes them from the common experiences of childhood of their peers. It is helpful to see poverty through the eyes of children (Ridge, 2002). Nothing we see in the Green Paper supports the children who today cannot join in the kind of conversation that begins, “Do you remember that school outing when...?” Although its findings must impact on the Green Paper’s proposals, there appears to be no explicit mention of the government’s investigation of the costs of education, especially school uniforms and school trips (Department for Work and Pensions, 2003);

- The government, when setting benefit levels, has not articulated what it means by ‘an adequate income which allows for a decent life’ (Department of Social Security, 1998); and
- Although there are increasing employment opportunities, many families we work with are concerned about the sustainability of jobs and the adequacy and reliability of income. Barriers to work do not always disappear when someone gets a job, they may simply become another thing that parents have to cope with day to day (Thurley ed, 2003).

Health

As with family poverty, the link between the Green Paper’s proposals and wider health initiatives needs to be explicit. Although we cannot comment on the proposals, which will emerge in the National Service Framework for Children, if the Green Paper’s key outcome on health is to be achieved, rates of low birth weight must be reduced and the incidence of breastfeeding (not mentioned in the Green Paper) increased.

Specialist health services

We welcome the increase in capacity for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Many calls to the Parentline Plus helpline are from parents whose child is on a long CAMHS waiting list. However, we would like to see more use of interim support such as one to one telephone support to parents to help them give better support to a child going through a crisis.

The Family Welfare Association is particularly concerned about 16 to 25 year olds who miss out on services at present because they are seen as neither children nor adults.

Tackling bullying

Parents need to be actively involved in any anti-bullying policy developed by a school, and staff needs regular training on talking to parents whose child has been bullied or bullies.

Question How can we improve support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, building on the work of the Children’s Panel?

- The Children’s Panel needs to be extended; it is able to deal with very few cases each year. At the same time, there needs to be a cohesive and comprehensive policy approach to this group of young people. Currently, different local authorities deal with the issue in different ways, some using Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, others using Section 17.
- Projects supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children need secure funding. A Family Welfare Association project in West Sussex had to close because funding was withdrawn despite 93 per cent of those attending going on to achieve further and higher education qualifications.
- We are also concerned that the needs of children in families seeking asylum are not addressed in the Green Paper. Indeed, the proposal, discussed following the Queen’s Speech, to take children into care if their family’s claim has been rejected and they have not left the country, undermines the government’s desire to put the best interests of children first. Forcibly breaking up families, harms children.

Question How can we ensure that serious welfare concerns are appropriately dealt with alongside criminal proceedings?

- It must be an explicit priority for the youth justice system to safeguard children’s welfare and promote their well-being.
- We strongly recommend the use of family group conferences. They have a proven record of engaging the wider family in taking responsibility for planning for children who have committed an offence. Restorative justice family group conferences combine a requirement that victims are involved and ensure that the plans made take account of the need for restorative action on the part of the offender. It should be a requirement of youth offending teams to use family group conferences (Family Rights Group, 2003).

Question How can we encourage clusters of schools to work together around extended schools?

- There will need to be clear accountability and budget streams, as well as comprehensive multi-disciplinary training.

Chapter 3: Supporting Parents and Carers

In our shared experience, the reality of parenting is complicated. Poverty, low educational achievement, racism, poor housing, disability, domestic violence, poor mental health, substance misuse, separation, divorce, re-partnering, all serve to make parenting more difficult. For example, the link between poverty and care is well established. In one study, 98% of families whose children were at risk of suffering emotional maltreatment or neglect were characterised by the extreme poverty of their material environment (Thoburn et al, 2000). A study of children in need found 'a pattern of long term unemployment, relative poverty and deprivation, exacerbated by growing children straining families' limited resources. In turn, children were affected by family stresses arising from poverty' (Tunstall and Aldgate, 2000).

Our work, backed up by research (Ghate and Hazel, 2002), indicates that parenting skills can be enhanced and that the provision of good family support makes a real difference to children, even in very chaotic families. Given how badly children often fare in public care, proper investment in family support is a sensible and positive way to improve outcomes for children and young people. The Green Paper lists the protective factors that can help children overcome disadvantage:

- Strong relationships with parents, family members and other significant adults;
- Parental interest and involvement in education with clear and high expectations;
- Positive role models;
- Individual characteristics such as an outgoing nature, self-motivation, intelligence;
- Active involvement in family, schools and community life;
- Recognition, praise and feeling valued.

Well-supported parents and carers best deliver each of these.

That 'parenting has a strong impact on a child's educational development, behaviour and mental health' (p39) is an understatement. Parents are the strongest influence in a child's life. There is a clear link between parenting and parent's attitudes to learning at home and their aspirations for their child over and above their involvement with school (DesForges, 2003). Parents teach values and can offer the support children need for their full and rounded development, provide stability and protect them physically and emotionally. Parents are their child's first educators and shape the development and learning of their children as they grow to adulthood. Throughout their child's early years they will remain their most important role models. Strong families help build healthy communities where people rely on their neighbours and families are confident in bringing up their children.

Where this is not happening, parents and families need easy and speedy access to an infrastructure of support that is known to be accessible – through self referral where possible – non-stigmatising, coherent and respectful; where they will meet professionals and voluntary sector workers who they can trust and who treat them as partners; and with child protection as one relatively small part of a wide spectrum of services for all families.

There will always be a small minority of families with entrenched problems who cannot cope, despite a range of support services being provided. If the children in these families are to be helped to progress into work and build more positive family lives for their own children, sustained investment in such families is needed over many years. The help offered by statutory agencies is to catch them at various points to solve a problem that is currently overwhelming, and to get them back on their feet until the next difficulty emerges. Voluntary agencies that are in a position to pull the various agencies together and trusted by the families, are often best placed to provide the close support they need. The Family Welfare Association's home-based family support service is a good example. Following the Green Paper, the challenge will be to provide services to the most chaotic families while at the same time ensuring that those families that struggle for years receive help early on.

Universal parenting services

We welcome the emphasis on developing more and better universal services and the recognition of parents' need for such services. However, our own experience as well as a great deal of research (for example Buchanan, Ritchie and Bream, 2001), shows that at present parents usually know when they want help but the services they would like are limited by the gate-keeping inherent within the limited public sector purse. The cost of an adequate infrastructure of support for parents must not be underestimated, neither should the savings inherent in a structure of provision, which genuinely ensured access to and take up of necessary services that would, amongst other things, avoid the need for intervention, rather than a majority of services with the prime aim of ensuring necessary intervention.

Parents want services that treat them with respect, are accessible and are culturally appropriate. Services need to be sensitive to cultural and individual differences within families and groups. Barriers to services for parents living in poverty include stigma, fear, loss of control, loss of privacy, the possibility of gossip, the fear of being labelled as not coping, and the difficulty in distinguishing between support and interference. The Green Paper does not detail ways in which they can be broken down, even though what distinguishes the parenting of poor and middleclass children is not so much the style of parenting as the ability to access services when problems arise (Steele and Pollock, 1968, Helfer and Kempe, 1974, Hanson et al, 1997, Ritchie, 2003).

In the experience of all three organisations, black and minority ethnic families are particularly at risk of being excluded from services (Richards and Ince, 2000, Richards, 2001).

The barriers are compounded by the poor image of many services and the perceptions of users who, quite understandably, cannot see what differentiates one service or one professional from another. They are forced to hunt around until, if they are lucky, they find something or someone that can help. And then it is often only because someone in their street told them that a particular service had been helpful.

Parents do not talk of 'universal' and 'targeted' or 'specialist' services. When services are seen as targeted, the sense of entitlement is diminished and particular groups may feel pathologised. If services were perceived by both providers and users as being universal services, some of them used by everyone and some that *could be* used by everyone, the existing barriers may become less significant. Of course, specialist and targeted services will continue, but this approach would reinforce the responsibility of universal services to reach the groups they currently fail.

However, universality alone does not make a service acceptable. For that it must be owned by recipients, reflect their needs and respect their views. We are concerned that parents' views on the type of services they need have not been adequately sought and the Green Paper takes little account of the need to involve parents from an early stage in the ongoing development, design and delivery of services. Examples of services designed to involve parents are cited in the Green Paper, but not of parents involved in the design of services.

Examples of good practice in this area abound in the voluntary sector. Many community-based initiatives run by national and local voluntary organisations are succeeding because they ensure that the support they give is grounded in the community in which it is set, owned and shaped by the families that use them. There needs to be regular investment in these services and ways developed to ensure that new initiatives learn from them what works and what doesn't. This should include databases of research and evaluated good practice.

To ensure take up of universal services we recommend:

- Sustained investment in a range of responsive, flexible services that reflect what parents want, are available when they need them and meet the needs of all parents, from those who are in particularly difficult circumstances to those whose family life is more settled;
- Extensive public education that focuses on cultural change, demonstrating to parents and carers as well as the wider public that seeking support is a sign of strength. This must also include extensive publicity on the availability of services, access points and how they will respond;

- The development of flexible and free services available via a helpline, including fast and free access to information on local family support services and materials on a range of concerns, a 24 hour email support service to target fathers, telephone-based group workshops and the further availability of long term one to one telephone support for parents and carers in particularly difficult circumstances;
- Induction and in-service training for all frontline staff working in existing universal services such as schools, health and social services, on consulting and working with parents, plus training on how to identify parents and carers presenting with particular problems which may need more specialist support, how to select the most appropriate service and how to signpost them to this support when it is needed.

Some practical suggestions for working with parents:

- More local outreach and development work, which is one of the best ways to inform parents and encourage parents to spread the news about what parenting support is available. This will require investment in staff time, training on working with parents and promotional materials;
- Greater use of a parent to parent approach. This strengthens communities, increases social capital and expands the family support workforce. Parentline Plus delivers this through the recruitment and training of parents as facilitators, equipping them to deliver parenting workshops to other parents. Further investment in this kind of work would ensure that participating parents built on their own skills and future employment potential;
- Extend facilitated group work in local community settings such as schools and Children's Centres, where parents and carers gain from helping each other;
- Build on the opportunities offered by information technology. The next generation of parents will be very computer literate and government targets for online accessibility mean most adults and young people will be able to access the internet with ease. Interactive, secure technologies could provide parents with support, advice and information that is accessible, offers information in community languages, reflects low literacy levels and is sufficiently adaptable to give customised responses to individual concerns.

A national helpline

Helplines alone may not be appropriate for some parents, particularly those who are hard to reach, not articulate, without a telephone or non-English speakers. However, as well as answering specific questions, they can improve access to services and are cost effective. In the experience of Family Rights Group, for example, families that become involved with social services because of child protection concerns, families whose children are looked after, and families who are unsuccessfully seeking help, are often frightened, confused and ill informed. They struggle to get the service they and their children need. Independent advice from a qualified social worker or lawyer who is knowledgeable about

social services procedures and the law can help families engage with social services more productively.

The Parentline Plus helpline fulfils some of the universal support needs well in that it:

- Gives a strong, positive message about seeking help;
- Is anonymous and confidential;
- Avoids stigma and fear of gossip;
- Is accessible and free; and
- Is a parent-to-parent service.

Parentline Plus answers thousands of calls every month, many of them from parents in crisis. Call data shows that the line is particularly effective when a parent has no resource to help or support from family or friends. As well as providing a service in its own right, the helpline is an important gateway to other more specialist services.

However, helplines must be well funded as must the specialist advice and information services run by organisations like Family Rights Group, Young Minds and Drugs Line. Despite very little promotion of the service, many callers fail to get through. Only increased funding can increase the capacity of the service.

As well as information service, parents sometimes need advocacy services. Family Rights Group are introducing an advocacy service for families in London. However, local authorities are not currently required to ensure that such a service is available in their locality. We recommend that local authorities are required to ensure that independent advocacy services are available for families whose children are subject to child protection procedures.

Parents' information meetings at key transition points

We welcome the recognition of key transition points in all children's lives as being a time for targeted support. But what are the links between these transition times and the triggers discussed in the Chapter 4? What happens if you are at a transition and a trigger at the same time, for example moving up to secondary school while your family is homeless?

We are also concerned that some families may not benefit from school-based services. We discuss this further on p 18.

Family learning programmes

We welcome plans to extend family learning programmes. Evidence supports them as an extremely effective way of improving adult basic skills and engaging parents in their child's education. Any material developed for universal services

must reflect low literacy and numeric levels but specific support must also be available, presented in ways that enable easy access and understanding.

Question How can good quality decision-making by social services in relation to achieving permanence for the children for whom they are responsible best be achieved?

- There is now a substantial body of evidence (Family Rights Group, 2003) that family group conferences are an effective way of engaging with families and making plans for children in need of care and protection. However, although the number of local authorities using family group conferences is growing, over half of all local authorities still do not provide this service.
- Family group conferences bring the wider family together and they then take the lead in decision-making for children who need decisions taking in order to achieve permanence. There is good research evidence to show that they are effective, particularly at ensuring children who cannot live with their birth parents live with a member of their wider family if possible.
- We recommend that the government promote family decision-making meeting (currently called family group conferences) and that there is a requirement on local authorities to provide them. Families should be given the right to call a family group conference when there are serious care or protection issues, including school exclusion, concerning a child in their family. In the long term, we would like to see legislation or guidance requiring that a family group conference must be convened before any decision is finally reached for a child to be in long term care or adopted.

Question Building on Choice Protects, what more can we do to recruit and retain more foster carers who are able to meet the needs of looked after children?

- We recommend greater use of 'support foster care'. The evidence is that this service is welcomed by parents and carers, makes a real difference to those who are under enormous stress, is rewarding for foster carers, and is valued by children. Foster carers acting as support carers can often combine this with other jobs, thus extending the pool of carers.
- Family and friends carers report considerable difficulties with current assessment models that often discriminate against them in favour of stranger carers. The performance of local authorities in approving family and friends carers is also unacceptably varied. In 15 local authorities in England over 30% of foster carers are relatives or friends, while in another 10 authorities only 5% or less are relatives or friends (Department of Health, 2003). We recommend that the government sets targets for increasing the number of

family and friends foster carers and introduces a new framework for the assessment and support of family and friends carers.

- Foster carers and their children and partners must be recognised as part of a caring team. Foster carers often say that their own families tend to be forgotten by local authorities, despite their importance in ensuring that a placement is supported.
- We welcome the proposed increases to paid leave and maternity pay, but a far greater impact on recruitment and retention would be made by the introduction of allowance to kinship carers. The allowance would reflect the costs of care and be paid in addition to a range of non-maintenance payments as set out on page 5 of this response.

Question How can local authorities, working with the voluntary, community and private sectors, develop a range of specialist parenting support services?

- Any services developed must take account of the specific cultural needs of black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and retain awareness that some communities are linked less by location than by culture. For example, from its earlier work with BME families, Family Rights Group has identified a clear role for family support services to be delivered through religious and community centres (Richards and Ince, 2000). We are acutely aware that members of these communities may be reluctant to access services that are perceived as linked in some way to social services providers. Our knowledge and experience of the Travelling community leads us to emphasise strongly that service delivery and access to information and resources must be through known and trusted individuals and agencies.
- More than 45% of calls to the Parentline Plus helpline are from parents of teenagers. Two thousand parents every month download material on teenagers from the Parentline Plus website. Family Rights Group's advice service receives a significant number of calls from parents who are very concerned about the behaviour of their teenage children. Worryingly, despite extreme difficulties, including incidents of violence by the children, parents report great difficulty in obtaining help or advice from social services. These children are obviously children in need, but are not receiving assessments. We recommend that local authorities are required to develop services that offer advice and support to parents whose teenagers are beyond their control. This should also include providing services to the teenagers themselves and to the wider family.

Question Working with local authorities and other existing providers, what steps should the Government take to make home visiting services more widely available?

- Consult with community leaders and other providers of services to BME and marginalized groups in order to ensure that services are appropriate.
- Assess and support the needs of disabled parents and their carers and their families, especially where young carers are involved.
- Provide long term, secure funding to organisations providing home-based care. The best place to support, amongst others, treatment resistant families, anti-social families, and substance and alcohol misusing parents is in the home. The Family Welfare Association's home-based family support service provides a good model of an effective service.
- Disseminate information about good practice in home visiting. A number of models exist, including Home Start, Family Welfare Association and Community Mothers, but it may be necessary to select and adapt models to the needs of particular locations and particular families.

Question What further action could be taken to extend the use of direct payments by families with disabled children?

- The process of direct payments should be more transparent and local authorities should better promote the scheme. Social workers need training. We have come across significant numbers who appear to be unaware of the legal status of direct payments. Consideration should also be given to extending direct payment to parents of non-disabled children, for example, disabled parents.

Question What more could be done to improve services for children and families of offenders?

- The best service for children and families of offenders would be a review of sentencing policy. The development of more secure centres as alternatives to prison would do a great deal to keep families together. When a custodial sentence is necessary, prisoners should be located near their families and families should be involved with both the sentence plan and the resettlement plan.
- Voluntary organisations should be funded so that they can ensure that families always receive information on a range of practical issues and on how they can be involved with the prison from the start of the sentence.

- Parenting education programmes for both the prisoner and the family should be offered before and after release, and one to one support for the family as a whole, or for an individual parent, should always be available, usually by telephone. Where appropriate, voluntary organisations should be funded to provide this service.
- While evidence is limited on the number of children of offenders placed with relatives, government figures indicate that 60% of women who are imprisoned are mothers or are pregnant. Action for Prisoners' Families and our own findings estimate that the majority of children separated from their mothers are cared for by grandparents. We welcome the Green Paper's emphasis on support but it must be seen to cover grandparents and kinship carers. We recommend that an allowance is paid to carers to improve the well-being of children and ensure that contact can take place between imprisoned parents and their children.
- We recommend better links are made between the Home Office and the DfES over access arrangements in prison.

Chapter 4: Early Intervention and Effective Protection

The information hub

If trigger events, periods of transition and worsening family circumstances are fed into the identification, referral and tracking system, this must be seen as an opportunity to offer a holistic package of support to the whole family and must not jeopardise families' willingness to seek support.

With this proviso, triggers could include, a parent in prison, a parent with a mental health problem, a parent with substance misuse problems, teenage parents, domestic violence, evictions and divorce and separation.

Services are going to have to guarantee a level of response rarely possible at present. For example, there is an acute need for support for parents and children to cope with the consequences of family breakdown, negotiating arrangements for contact and the formation of a new family. Family Advice and Information Networks will help improve referral and sign-posting and the expansion of contact centres will help children maintain contact with both parents. We would like to see add-on services at contact centres to help parents come to terms with post separation parenting and reach agreement on cooperative parenting, plus support for the children who, even under the best arrangements, are still having to make an unacknowledged geographical and emotional journey between parents every few days.

Co-location around schools, Sure Start Children's Centres and primary care

We welcome the proposal to locate services around schools, but are concerned that school-based provision may not be appropriate for everyone and may entrench existing exclusion. For example, until fathers are better involved with schools through, amongst other things, schools reaching out to fathers, information meetings could reinforce existing gender divisions.

The emphasis on service delivery and referral through educational establishments could exclude access for groups such as Travellers, especially nomadic families, given that their contact is with Travellers' Education Services rather than mainstream school services, asylum seekers, homeless families and other highly mobile families.

The use of schools could also exclude families where parents are distrustful of school, often as a consequence of their own difficulties at school, and families where children are truanting, sometimes as a result of bullying, and sometimes as a result of a number of complex difficulties. It will be important to recognise that school-based provision is only one approach and not the only approach.

Question What currently gets in the way of effective information sharing, and how can we remove the barriers?

- We are extremely concerned about the proposals to develop an identification, referral and tracking system (IRT). It will divert resources that would be better used to develop and provide family support services, encounter significant difficulties in ensuring compliance with the Human Rights Act and prove ineffective in safe guarding children.
- The proposal ignores the findings of the recent study into child protection registers reported in the government's response to the Laming Inquiry. This found that professionals making an enquiry of the register could be falsely reassured that a child was or was not on the register. In our view, these and other difficulties are likely to be magnified by a register of all children.

Question What should be the threshold and triggers for sharing information about a child?

- We welcome the proposals in the Green Paper for sharing information about children at risk and believe they will do much to alleviate the lack of information sharing identified in the Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report. The mechanisms developed should also be seen as a way of ensuring that parents get the services they need. However, parents and children and young people must be entitled to a confidential service from professionals and agencies and information should only be divulged if it suggests a child is at risk of harm. Parents and children must be told the scope and rationale of the

system and there should be clear guidelines on who can access the information and parents' own right of access.

- Parent must always be informed immediately information is shared, unless there is evidence that to do so would place a child in danger. In these circumstances, information must be shared with parents as soon as possible.

Question What are the circumstances (in addition to child protection and youth offending) under which information about a child could or must be shared without the consent of the child or their carers?

- When it comes to the attention of an agency that a child of school age is not on any school roll or not receiving 'education otherwise'; it is the child's right to attend school or have a reasonable alternative.
- We can envisage no other circumstances that would not risk a breach of the right to family life under the Human Rights Act.

Question Should information on parents and carers, such as domestic violence, imprisonment, mental health or drug problems, be shared?

- The research evidence on domestic violence does suggest that, even when parents say children have not witnessed an incident, it is likely that they have, and there is a strong association between domestic violence and violence to children (Hester and Pearson, 1997, Hester and Radford, 1996). For these reasons we believe information about domestic violence can be shared.
- Imprisonment, mental health and drug problems are not in themselves indicators that a child is being harmed. We are opposed to the routine sharing of information, which may be misused or may label children and families unfairly. There should always be a threshold in place, strongly linked to significant harm criteria as set out in the Children Act 1989.
- If parents or carers request that information is shared, then this should happen.
- The dangers of sharing incorrect information must be recognised. Accuracy is the key to trust and acceptance and those acting on the information must be able to check on it easily. Parents and children, of sufficient age, must always be informed of any information held about them on the system. There will need to be a process that allows parents to comment on the information and appeal against incorrect information being held, as well as setting timescales and protocols for reviewing information. Interpreters and translated information should be available for families who do not have English as a first language and those who do not communicate in the written word.

Question How can we ensure that no children slip through the system?

- Our experience is less of children slipping through the system but rather of families desperate for help from a system that often turns them away without a proper assessment of a child's needs. This is after all what happened to Victoria Climbié.
- To ensure that no children slip through the system, families need clear entitlements to services and access to advocacy services to help them get the services they need. We must ensure families are supported and assisted to obtain a proper assessment of need and services to which they are entitled.

Question What issues might stand in the way of effective information transfer across local authority boundaries?

- Some issues are: different understandings of the scope and definition of child protection; unclear accountability and communication structures; unclear funding arrangements for upkeep of such a system.

Chapter 5: Accountability and Integration

Accountability takes time – checking with managers etc before a decision is made. FWA fieldworkers report that families often find this frustrating now and it militates against good inter-agency working. Any new procedures and systems must address this.

Question Should all authorities and other relevant local agencies have a duty to promote the well-being of children?

- Yes, definitely, but the government must take the lead. Agencies responsible for youth justice, asylum seekers and prisons must all be included under a duty to promote the well-being of children.
- Schools in particular should be looking at much more than academic achievement. For many children, academic achievement along the lines of the national curriculum is not possible. Local education authorities should also be responsible for the welfare of all children in their area and make educational provision for newly arrived asylum seekers, travelling families and other transient groups, as well as the large numbers of children who are not in school due to behavioural or other difficulties. Models of good practice, for example, the inclusive models adopted in the London Borough of Newham, should be shared with other local education authorities.

Question How best can young people be involved in local decision-making and should the Government establish, for example, minimum standards for this?

- We welcome the emphasis that is being placed on involving young people. But for reasons that we have already outlined on page 4 of this response, a similar emphasis accompanied by appropriate resources must be placed on consulting and involving the parents and carers of children.
- Education law needs to incorporate the rights of the child to participate in decision-making, for example, special educational needs decisions.

Question Should Local Safeguarding Children Boards be statutory, and what should their powers and duties be?

- We welcome the proposal that Children's Boards should be placed on a statutory basis. We recommend that a duty is placed on Children's Boards to ensure that specialist advice is sought pertaining to children and families who are vulnerable through membership of a particular group, for example, BME families, Travellers, asylum seekers, kinship carers
- A database of information on the needs and issues concerning such groups should be retained by every Children's Board. There should be a positive duty on Boards to contact an identified agency or expert to clarify whether any key policy, practice or research developments have occurred which add to available knowledge of these groups, prior to any decision being made which impacts on members of vulnerable groups or the group as a whole.
- The Boards should include service user representation as mandatory, and by service user we mean parents, families, carers, children and young people.

Question What services should be required to form part of Children's Trusts, and what are the risks in involving more services, for instance, aligning Connexions geographical structures with Children's Trusts?

- Service provision must include access to advice on welfare rights, to ensure that families get the full financial support to which they are entitled, and debt advice for those with other money problems.
- Other services to be included: play and leisure, advocacy services and access to translation and interpreting services.

Chapter 6: Workforce Reform

Question Should all those working with children share a common core of skills and knowledge?

Part of the common core of skills and knowledge should cover working with parents and the wider family.

Question Should there be a common qualifications structure for all those in key roles working with children? If so, which roles should it cover?

If there is a common qualifications structure it should cover key roles working with children *and their families*.

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