

Parentline<sub>plus</sub> *fwa*  
Family Welfare Association



**House of Commons  
Education and Skills Committee**

**Submission by  
Family Policy Alliance**

**November 2004**

## 1. What is the Family Policy Alliance?

The Family Policy Alliance was formed in February 2004 by three leading family support organisations: Family Rights Group, Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus, who, together, support a wide range of service users receiving universal and targeted family support services. Its purpose is to influence current policy debate about the role of the State to support families to care for their children safely.

The Alliance is supported by a much larger group of similar organisations, many of whom joined us in a seminar in May 2004, to express support for refocusing family support services to achieve the outcomes for children identified in the Government's Green Paper 'Every Child Matters'<sup>1</sup>.

Drawing on the extensive collective expertise of the three partners in providing information, advice and support services to families about the care and protection of their children, the Alliance aims to:

- highlight the central connection between the well being of children and the need for sustained support and investment in parents and family members
- promote the involvement of parents and families, as well as children, in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services and
- focus attention on the benefits for children, their families and society of taking effective action to tackle discrimination and social exclusion.

Our submission is informed by our experience of consulting with, and providing direct services to, thousands of families whose children are "in need" every year. When these families contact us, many of them tell us have been desperate for help for a long time, but have been unsuccessful in obtaining support from statutory service providers.<sup>2</sup> As service providers ourselves, we are continuously consulting with parents and families about the kinds of services they find useful and what the barriers are to accessing these. Our submission and recommendations to the Committee are therefore based on the practical perspective we bring from working closely with families from many differing backgrounds.

We have been active in contributing to the debate on the Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' and on the Children Bill 2004. We welcomed the proposed reforms in the Green Paper but we were disappointed that the Government's aim to achieve the five outcomes for children and young people appeared to give little weight to the central role of parents and families in achieving these for their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Every Child Matters, DfES, 2003

<sup>2</sup> See Tunstill and Aldgate *Services for Children in Need: From Policy into Practice*, The Children Act Now: Messages from Research DoH 2001

## 2. Why is it essential to work in partnership with parents<sup>3</sup>?

Children are society's future and parents, families, the community and the State have a shared responsibility to work in partnership in order to build secure foundations for this future<sup>4</sup>. These foundations rest on one core principle: children's welfare is best promoted in their family environment unless this places the child at risk of significant harm.<sup>5</sup> Parents and families are therefore central to meeting the aspirations the government has for children. This applies not just where children are living safely at home with their families, but also where there are child protection issues, for example:

- The great majority of children, including those where there is a formal concern about their welfare by protection agencies, live at home with their families<sup>6</sup>. Policies therefore need to be family centred otherwise they ignore the key people who are responsible for providing for the day to day care and well being of the vast majority of children and young people;
- Even when children have been identified as being at risk of harm, there is a strong body of research which shows that the key to the successful protection of children is a positive working partnership between the family and the local authority. Indeed the official summary of a number of research studies on child protection carried out in the 1990's stated that:

“an alliance is needed which involves parents and if possible children actively in the investigation, which takes account of their views and incorporates their goals into plans. A failure to achieve this level of co-operation helps to explain why some children remain safe at home when others do not”.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing upon this research evidence, government policy now requires that the principle and practice of partnership should be a central feature of family support and child protection interventions. Guidance on child protection states that:

*“parents know more about their family than any professional could possibly know, and well-founded decisions about a child should draw upon this knowledge and understanding”<sup>8</sup>*

More recently, announcing the launch of the Parenting Fund, the Minister for Children said:

*“Everything we know confirms that the quality of parenting in the home is the key to enabling a child to fulfil their potential. Yet parenting is one of the most*

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<sup>3</sup> Although the terms of reference of the committee cover “work with parents” this submission uses that term inclusively to embrace a wide concept of family, based on the child in the context of the adults who are connected with the child and must take into account the families' understanding of who is family to the child.

<sup>4</sup> The respective roles of the different partners is discussed more fully in a recent submission we made to the Commission on the Well-being of Children attached.

<sup>5</sup> See Department of Health (1990) *The Care of Children: Principles and Practice* in Regulations and Guidance, London, HMSO

<sup>6</sup> Recent figures show that 85% of children whose names are registered on the child protection register live at home or in their family network

<sup>7</sup> DoH, *Child Protection: Messages from Research 1995*, at p.45.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter 7 Working Together guidance

*difficult jobs and there are times when any family may need extra support. We want to make sure it is available to them.”*

However, although official policy on family support and child protection clearly requires statutory services to strengthen the family’s capacity to promote the well being of their children, there are still tensions between different government departments as to how this principle is applied in the broader context of policy strategies. These tensions are attributable to a number of factors, for example:

- A cross-departmental philosophical tension in government between supporting families with children in need on the one hand whilst simultaneously criticising families for their children’s inappropriate behaviour on the other. The government has increased its scrutiny of parenting and sought to identify what is ‘good parenting’, justifying its intervention and regulation of parenting beyond the remit of child protection because it believes that social ills and poor outcomes for children can be addressed through regulating parental behaviour and responsibilities;
- Fear of allocation of limited resources to making family support meaningful – this is discussed further below under section 3;
- Broader economic and social factors which inhibit effective parenting and wellbeing in children and families - the issues about what impacts on outcomes for children are complex and many families struggle with factors beyond their control such as poor health, lack of adequate housing and economic constraints. Such factors undermine policies which promote effective parenting<sup>9</sup>; and
- Support for families, which is broadly if not totally accepted at a policy level, is often not translated into practice in individual cases such that parental difficulties in raising their children is attributed to their personal failings rather than inadequate support in adverse circumstances, as identified by Ghate et al<sup>10</sup>.

These tensions make it difficult enough for professionals to understand the coherence of government strategies. For parents and families, it is even more difficult to know whether to see the State and its support policies as helpful, or critical, undermining and punitive.

In our view, policies and principles underpinning the delivery of services designed to promote the safety and well-being of children must be consistent, child focussed and family centred, with assistance from the State when parents need to be supported in their child rearing tasks<sup>11</sup>. This is not just the logical conclusion of the above – it is also a matter of domestic<sup>12</sup> and international law<sup>13 14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Ghate D and Hazel N *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping* 2004

<sup>10</sup> Ghate and Hazel, op cit supra

<sup>11</sup> This is the rationale behind Part III of the Children Act 1989. See also the summary of research in [The Children Act Now: Messages from Research](#) DoH 2001

<sup>12</sup> S.17 Children Act provides that local authorities have a general duty to provide services for children in need to safeguard and promote their welfare by providing services to the child or a member of the child’s family.

<sup>13</sup> Article 18 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 provides that State signatories should support parents to carry out their responsibilities for the upbringing and development of their children by providing ‘appropriate assistance’ to parents and legal guardians by providing services and facilities. Although not enforceable under domestic law, the Convention was ratified by the government in 1991

### 3. How far is working in partnership being achieved in current practice?

These tensions aside, the general commitment to working with and supporting parents is welcomed in principle. However, its implementation is flawed. The sad reality is that families with children in need do not receive adequate support and many have difficulties in accessing such support as is available. This fact is not just borne out by research<sup>15</sup>, but is also evidenced through our respective advice and support work. Every year, we collectively advise tens of thousands of parents, carers and family members who are desperately in need of support to help them raise their children. Their recurrent story is that they have to battle for months, if not years, to obtain the services they need, often to no avail. Services are not provided either because they have not been able to demonstrate that their need is acute enough to warrant even an *assessment* for support services, or because there simply are not the resources available to provide much needed services until the family situation has reached such a crisis that there is a child protection investigation. This practice was specifically disapproved by the government in 1995<sup>16</sup>, yet has persisted. Thus, whilst government policy constantly reiterates the importance of supporting families, the reality is that this support is frequently not available until it is too late.

### 4. Why is family support not available?

In the wake of the Laming inquiry<sup>17</sup>, the government is understandably focussed on the safety and well being of children but does not give adequate recognition, particularly in its allocation of resources and its audit processes, to the link between family support, working in partnership and improving outcomes for vulnerable children. This means that families continue to live in material poverty, without adequate support, which inevitably impairs their ability to raise their children as they would wish. Their children's well-being is undermined as a direct consequence.

*"Parents reported that, overall, tackling material poverty and deficits in family resources was their prime concern and that poverty was the cause of many of their problems."*<sup>18</sup>

In their overview of studies considering the aim of the Children Act 1989 to achieve a balance between State support and State protection for children underpinning family policy, Aldgate and Statham concluded that although the principles of the Act were sound, its implementation had been significantly affected by 'a *climate of intense competition for resources for public welfare services*.' This had inevitably resulted in the threshold for receiving support from the statutory sector being set high. At the

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and as such provides an important benchmark regarding the rights of children and families. Moreover the new provisions regarding the Children's Commissioner in the Children Bill 2004 which include a requirement that s/he must have regard to this Convention means that such international provisions have increasing significance and relevance to domestic child care policy and practice. – see clause 2(11)

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Act 1998 and Article 8 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms – right to family life subject to Article 8 (2), also reflected in s.23 (6) Children Act 1989

<sup>15</sup> The recent publication by Hedy Cleaver and Steve Walker (2004) on Assessing Children's Needs and Circumstances analyses the limited progress made by a sample group of authorities in implementing the 2000 DoH Assessment Framework. The report highlights that assessments were often child protection related. Unfortunately, the experience of the three organisations involved in the Family Policy Alliance is that it is still the case that, for many families, support is only forthcoming when their circumstances deteriorate to the point at which professionals have serious child protection concerns.

<sup>16</sup> DoH, Child Protection: Messages from Research, 1995,

<sup>17</sup> The Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report of an Inquiry, Lord Laming, 2003

<sup>18</sup> Ghate D and Hazel N Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping 2004

same time, the voluntary sector had also experienced the constraints and impact of changes in government policies for funding.<sup>19</sup>

The competition for finite resources conflates with the tensions in government policy elaborated above as to whether the State should support parents to bring up their children or whether its role is to regulate parental behaviour and monitor how these responsibilities are carried out.

Resourcing a wide range of both formal and informal family support is therefore the key to the successful implementation of the government's aim to promote the well-being of children. It is also imperative that the government is clear about the principles underpinning its family policy strategy and that there is consistency across departments about the values underpinning such policies. If child impact assessment statements for all proposed legislation also included impact on the family, there would be greater coherence as to how the proposals strengthen child and family well being.

## 5. What works in term of effective delivery of family support services?

However, even if family support is better resourced, it will only be effective if it is delivered in a way which is welcomed, rather than resented or avoided, by families. The parents we have consulted, and professionals in the Alliance who work with families in need of support to care for their children, give us the same messages time and again. Effective family support depends on two factors:

- parents need to be able to say what they need to support them to care for their children, and to be heard and respected; and
- there needs to be clarity as to the respective roles of the parent and the professional to provide the basis for a mutual trust between the parents and the agency which delivers support services.

This is not just based on the experiences of families we advise in our services. It is supported by findings made in government funded research summarised in Quinton 'Supporting Parents: Messages from Research'<sup>20</sup>. We have also conducted our own action research as part of the work of the Alliance so that our campaigning work is well grounded. This took the form of two consultation events to find out what works in terms of effective family support: focus groups with parents who need support to care for their children, and a seminar of professionals representing a range of voluntary sector agencies who work with these families. Together, they identified the following messages about what works in delivery of family support services, which we describe as the 6 R's, for service planning and delivery:

- **Reachable services** – for all family members. In an ideal world, families tell us that services would be: locally based, delivered at a 'one stop' shop by a range of providers, integrated to avoid going over painful stories and sorting out incomplete agency records, and through meeting with the professionals face to face.
- **Recognition** – of the family's view of their need. Many families are confused about how to get support services. They often do not know what they are entitled to receive and do not have any clear understanding of when or how their need for support is being assessed.

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<sup>19</sup> Aldgate and Statham *Services for Children in Need: From Policy into Practice*, The Children Act Now Messages from Research DoH 2001

<sup>20</sup> Quinton, D Supporting Parents: Messages from Research 2004 Jessica Kinsley

*“certain people seem to spend more time hiding from me than dealing with the problem.”*

- **Response** – to the needs of the whole family. Families have a good understanding of what works for them. Professionals should listen to the family’s wishes and preferences, both at the initial planning stage and at subsequent reviews of the plan for services.

*“don’t tell us what we want and make a decision.”*

- **Respect** – the family has expertise. Their culture and their skills need to be valued and respected. Families want to take responsibility for the challenges of parenting. Therefore, although they welcome support in their parenting role, they want to retain autonomy, choice and control about how to use services to benefit their children (unless this would in itself place the child at risk).

*“yes, we want your expertise but don’t assume you’re an expert on my life. Don’t pity or patronise me”*

- **Referral** – to services which meet their expressed need, or signposting so as to put a package of services together. Front line service workers should be interactive with families and able to signpost effectively and give information about a range of services. They therefore need training and adequate time to listen to what families want and help them work out what is available.
- **Review** – to check whether the support provided is useful. This will identify whether another service is needed or should it be used in a different way – through the individual case and also the overall service evaluation. Parents want their needs to be met so as to enhance their care of their children. In the heartfelt words of one parent who was seeking services on behalf of her disabled child:

*“Not being forgotten about, filed and ignored”*

## **6. What are the implications of these messages for practitioners in the workforce and workforce reform?**

Families tell us that the qualities they value in professionals working with them are:

- They are parents or understand the challenges of being a parent
- They return telephone calls
- They are good listeners

These are essentially matters of attitude on the part of the professionals and not resource intensive. Our findings are consistent with findings in the general population studies on what works in family support services summarised by Quinton as:

*‘parents wanted services*

- *to treat them like adults*
- *as partners in problem solving*

- *to be practical and professional*
- *to take their needs seriously*
- *to be fast and responsive'*<sup>21</sup>

In order to achieve these aspirations, service providers at our seminar agreed that frontline workers need to:

- be valued:
- be trained - specifically to work with parents, families and children
- have a sound knowledge of local resources
- be supported – by peers and through good quality, skilled supervision and consultation
- be properly remunerated to retain skills and expertise
- have an entitlement to paid sabbaticals to avoid 'burnout'

These messages need to be incorporated into the overview of workforce reform so that not only are knowledge, skills and competencies addressed and also the organisational and managerial support structures required to deliver effective services. It is therefore essential that senior managers are accountable for the quality of the service provided, that they take seriously their responsibility to train and supervise staff and that when errors of judgement are made and systems fail that they are held accountable.

## **7. What is the role of the voluntary sector in supporting families?**

The voluntary sector has a sound track record of providing flexible and innovative family support services, both independently and in partnership with local authorities. Our planning and review of services with parents tells us that families like the flexibility and 'lack of stigma' that voluntary sector services provide. Parents have welcomed group activities which have enabled them to meet with other parents and share solution finding in a less socially isolated way.

However, for the voluntary sector a continuing barrier to developing a range of services is the uncertainty about, or lack of, core and sustained funding. Not all services need to be constantly innovative: they need to be flexible and sustained when they work. Yet it is innovation which tends to attract funding in the voluntary sector. This leads to frequent repackaging of widely used and effective services in order to secure renewed funding. This is not only frustrating for the organisation and the staff employed on a project, but also means that work done in establishing trust with families using the service is undermined because of uncertainty about whether a project will continue. This was the experience of projects funded through the Children's Fund and the government's recognition of the implications of altering funding streams is welcome. The new proposed new partnership with the voluntary and community sectors may address this.<sup>22</sup>

## **8. What impact will the proposals for information sharing and databases have on working with parents to promote children's wellbeing?**

The Government in its consultation paper on information sharing<sup>23</sup> identifies two key issues:

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<sup>21</sup> Op cit supra

<sup>22</sup> See the recent compact and strategy between the DfES and the voluntary and community sector

<sup>23</sup> Information data bases in Children's services – DfES consultation document 2004



- Should the parent and child's consent be a prerequisite to putting information on the database?
- Should a professional have the consent of the child and parent to disclose information about their concerns for a child to other professionals?

Trust is central to effective intervention to support parents to meet the challenges of bringing up children. This is not only the view of parents. It is supported by longstanding and more recent research.

*'Support from any source should not make parents feel vulnerable, small or obligated. If 'support' does not have these features it is, simply, not 'supportive'.'*<sup>24</sup>

Unless the issues of consent and openness about recording information are properly balanced between the rights of the individuals to know what information is held about them and the need to protect children, the information database which the government sees as a useful tool to aid professional communication, risks undermining a core ingredient of effective family support services.

Moreover, families are unlikely to welcome a database which records information about their child but does not guarantee any entitlement to be assessed for support services. Family Policy Alliance made a number of proposals during the passage of the Children Bill 2004 to strengthen the provisions in clause 12 to ensure that if a child was flagged on the database as 'a cause for concern' by a particular professional, not only would the parents be told but it would trigger an assessment or process to identify what services would be useful for the child and parents. Thus, there would be a clear link between the legislation's aim to promote information sharing with duties to provide services under existing child care legislation, notably the Children Act 1989. Coherence between current and new legislation is more likely to promote good professional practice.

These proposals have not been incorporated in primary legislation, but we believe must now be addressed in the forthcoming Regulations and guidance. Families want to work with professionals but will be wary of doing so if they believe that professionals are making judgements and decisions about their children, leaving them with no control over what services are provided. Their confidence in professionals will be further undermined if the stigma of being 'flagged' does not result in any services to support them to remedy the concern.

## **9. Recommendations of the Family Policy Alliance:**

Drawing on this range of evidence, we conclude that achieving the desired outcomes for children's well being depends on effective support for families in their child rearing tasks. This will be best achieved by:

- I. Realistic and adequate resources for family support services from a range of providers for children who are 'in need' as defined in s.17 Children Act 1989.
- II. Service user involvement in the strategic planning of services in the area so that the design and delivery of services are suited to the needs of the local population.

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<sup>24</sup> Op cit supra at page 192

- III. Good quality information about entitlement to services for children in need and their families.
- IV. Local, well publicised information and access points for assessment and referral.
- V. Clear assessment processes, in which families are central to the planning and review of service. This would be best achieved by self assessment forms being developed for families to complete so that their view of their needs is central to an assessment of their needs.
- VI. One agency (or post within the agency) being designated to take responsibility for completing the assessment, or for delegating this, with clear accountability for the outcome. This is particularly important given the plethora of agencies which may be involved in the proposed Common Assessment Framework.
- VII. Families need to have an opportunity to consider the result of the assessment and proposed plan for services whilst it is in draft form – as they do in relation to adoption services and special educational needs statements.
- VIII. Following completion of the assessment, there needs to be clarity about which agency is responsible for deciding whether services should be provided and if so, for delivering these.
- IX. Before a local authority takes over decision making or care of a child because of child protection concerns, families should be given the opportunity to request and hold a family group conference to enable the family to agree a plan to promote and safeguard the child's welfare.
- X. Clear lines of accountability and access to complaints procedures.
- XI. Access to independent advice and advocacy support to make representations about service entitlement and delivery.
- XII. Up to date data on local and national services to which the family can be referred according to their need.
- XIII. Regular reviews of service provision in which families are key contributors.
- XIV. Semi informal services need to be widely available and providers need to make sure that excluded groups are provided for. To develop these kinds of services, planners and providers need to consult with users of the services but also seek out the views of those who may need but do not use the services. These requirements should become a standard part of the audit of standards of service planning and delivery.
- XV. Senior managers should be accountable for the quality of the service provided, and ensure that audits are carried out which involve service users They must take responsibility for training and supervising staff. When errors of judgement are made and systems fail they should be held accountable.

Overall, policies and practice should support families to use their skills and strengths so as to ensure their children's well being and also give them a range of supports to assist them with the challenging tasks of parenting. This core value needs to underpin explicitly the policies of all government departments.

## **10. Conclusion**

Our submissions are informed by the services the three organisations, Family rights Group, Family Welfare Association and Parentline Plus provide, the views of users of these services and our consultations with both families and service providers. These messages are reinforced by research which consistently concludes that partnership is a core requirement for effective Interventions to support children and their families.

Our recommendations require government and policy makers to spell out clearly the cross-departmental value base for the reform of family support services and family policies generally to achieve optimal outcomes for children in partnership with families. They also require a firm commitment to providing resources not only to develop and sustain services but also to train and support professionals with the requisite values and skills to deliver the services in such a way as to make a real difference to children and families.

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