

NHSSB Family Support Strategy

Findings from consultation exercise with Parent Focus groups

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By Parenting Forum NI

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Context and Rationale

In September 2003, the government published a Green paper: Every Child Matters. This paper sets out a framework for improving outcomes for all children and their families in 5 areas:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a positive contribution
- Economic well being

In this context the NHSSB is reviewing and re-writing its Family Support Strategy to be reflective of the needs of the children and families within the Board area as identified by a range of stakeholders.

Clearly parents are one of the most important stakeholders so in order to ensure that parent's views are taken into account in re-writing the Strategy, the Parenting Forum[Ni] was approached to carry out a consultation process with parents across the Board. To facilitate this process a short programme was designed for use with a number of parent focus groups. The exercises used gave parents the opportunity to identify what family support meant to them, what they saw as their most important sources of family support and their vision for the future in terms of family support.

In Lord Northbourne's presentation to the House of Lords in July 2003 he acknowledged that even though support is available to parents, too many are falling through the net because services are over stretched and, more importantly, not working together. He goes on to say [taken from a recent report from the Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health] 'the way parents look after their babies and toddlers makes an important difference to their mental health and social and emotional development. The impact of parenting and its potential for improving mental, social and emotional health is discernible both in the child and later in adulthood'. This consultation serves to impact on the future direction of family support services to be delivered in the NHSSB by listening to the voices of parents so that each and every child is clearly seen to 'matter'.

The Consultation Process

The Parenting Forum [NI], a Project managed by the Parents Advice Centre, was tasked by the NHSSB to carry out the consultation exercise with parents. The Parenting Forum[NI] has designed a model for engaging with parents and has considerable experience in carrying out consultation exercises with parents throughout Northern Ireland. It has contact with and networks with parents on a daily basis and is well placed to conduct real and meaningful consultations with parents based on existing established relationships.

The Parenting Forum[NI] used its own internal facilitators for the majority of the focus groups. External facilitators who are members of the Parenting Forum were used to facilitate the remaining. Consultation with parents requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators who are capable of working sensitively with diverse groups and facilitators were chosen accordingly. Focus groups were well attended thus demonstrating the genuine interest of parents in contributing their views on issues that may impact on the Family Support Strategy. Parents very clearly want to be consulted.

Consultation Methodology

A consultation pack was designed by the Parenting Forum[NI] manager, Alison Loughlin. The use of this pack ensured a uniform approach across all focus groups in collecting and collating information on parent's views. User friendly materials were designed to facilitate parents to share their experiences, feelings and ideas [see Appendix 1: Family Support Strategy Parent Focus group pack]. Focus groups were used as the data gathering method because they brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their experiences and identify issues of individual and common concern. Existing support groups/networks were approached with a view to becoming involved. The Parenting Forum[NI] was conscious at the outset of the need to ensure that a diverse group of parents were consulted. Focus groups therefore included lone parents, male parents, parents from ethnic minority groups and parents who are caring for a child with a disability. The Parenting Forum[NI] is, however, mindful of the fact that because of the time and budgetary constraints, it was impossible to represent all parents.

16 groups were represented in the focus groups. Quantitative information was collected from the focus group parents. 130 parents were accessed by the consultation exercise and these parents cared for a total of 305 children.

The 16 groups represented in the focus groups were:

Larne Care Centre	Larne
Gold Surestart	Cookstown
Harpurs Hill Early Years Project	Coleraine
Ballykeel Surestart	Ballymena
Gingerbread NI	Ballymena*
NIMBA	Carrickfergus*

Barnardos Parenting Matters	Carrickfergus and N'abbey
Larne Parents group-Antiville	Larne
NCH	Larne
Fosters Carers NI	Ballymena*
Cookstown Women's Aid	Cookstown
NICEM	Coleraine*
PAC	Ballymena
Carers NI	Cushendall
Carers Support Group	Cushendall
Carrickergus Women's Forum	Carrickfergus

* denotes a mixed group of parents from across the NHSSB

Focus groups were held at times which suited parents and transport and childcare costs were met to ensure accessibility.

Each facilitator compiled a report based on the 4 exercises and any other comments contributed by parents. The responses were analysed independently by an external consultant. She was also responsible for writing this report in collaboration with the Parenting Forum's Regional Manager, Alison Loughlin. The report summarises the findings from the focus groups and draws on these to identify the key issues for the NHSSB and other key stakeholders involved in the process of re-writing the NHSSB Family Support Strategy.

Parent Focus Groups: the Findings

Findings from the focus groups are described under the following headings:

- Parent's views of what 'family support' means to them
- Significant sources of support for parents
- Parents views of the least important and most important sources of support
- Parent's views of their support needs in the areas of:
 - Child protection
 - Family support
 - Health
- Other comments by parents

1. Parent's views of what family support means to them

Parents were asked to record what thoughts came to mind when they heard the term 'family support'. The analysis of parent's responses to this exercise will enable other stakeholders to consider parent's views in arriving at a definition of 'family support'. The following is a categorised list of parent's responses.

Family circle

Parents
Brothers/sisters
In laws
Cousins
Son/daughter
Ex partner
Partner

Statutory

GP
Health visitor
Healthcare child support services
Social worker/social services
Medical services
Police
Schools
Special Education
Education system

Financial

Financial support eg family allowance
Tax credits

Childcare/youth groups

Childminders
Toddler group leader
Nursery
After schools
Playgroups
Youth groups
Childminding groups
Creches
Mother&Toddler groups

Friends

Friends
Neighbours
Work colleagues
Other mums
Other women in similar situations

Religious

Church
Church creches
Parish community

Voluntary and community

Gingerbread
PAC
Sure Start
Women's Aid
Barnardos
CAB
St Vincent de Paul
Homestart
Carers

Practical help

Availability of parks
Child friendly recreation
Buses
Help in home when ill
Break from the kids
Key worker to help
Housing

Others

Social outings
Solicitor
Someone to talk to
Help when you need it
Being valued as a parent
Specialist help
Locally based, accessible services
Stigma

Information

Benefits advice
Information on range of issues
Bus timetables available
Professionals need to know what's available
Access to information which is easily available at a central point

Parenting classes/support

Children have skills we don't have
Classes for parents
Family support worker
Parenting groups

In analysing the frequency of responses, it became clear that, for many of the groups, parents, family, and extended family equate with the term 'family support'. Schools, Churches, neighbours and friends were also cited by several of the focus groups. Virtually every group mentioned the full range of childcare facilities whilst amongst the statutory services, GPs and Health Visitors were frequently named. It was also clear that focus groups equated the term 'family support' with a range of voluntary and community groups. Analysis of the responses from the NICEM group and individual parents from other focus groups indicate that for these parents family is synonymous with the term 'family support' but that the geographical distance of family members hinders this support.

The overall definition of family support emerging from the focus group responses is that it is support that families can access at different times of their childrens' lives, more often from other family members. Other forms of support tended to be accessed at times of crisis or change.

2. Significant sources of support for parents

Parents were asked to identify significant people and organisations involved in supporting them. In so doing this exercise provided extensive information on those organisations and individuals they consider can best meet their family support needs. The information has been classified into a series of groups.

Family circle

Husband/partner
Wife
Parents
Own children
Foster children's birth parent
Older foster children
In laws

Childcare/Youth

Mother&Toddler groups
Childminders
Summer schemes
After schools
Specialist youth club
Nursery
Childcare workers/students
Playgroups
Youth groups
Creches
Playgroup
Day care staff

Statutory

Health visitors
Midwife
District nurse
School nurse
Schools
Teachers
Education system
GP
Social workers
Mental health workers
Bedwetting clinic
Health system
Child development clinic
Government: benefits
Speech therapist
Occupational therapist
Physiotherapist
Community paediatric nurse
Asthma clinic
Child psychiatrist
Child counselling service
'Some' social services
Hospital
Housing Executive
Warden from Housing Executive
Library
Ante-natal classes

Voluntary/community groups

Sure Start
PAC
TAMBA
NIMBA
Barnardos: Parenting Matters
Barnardos: Young Carers
Gingerbread
Parenting Forum
NSPCC
CAB
PAKT club
Women's centre
Foster carers NI/foster support groups
Women's Aid
Homestart
St Vincent de Paul
Harpur's Hill Early Years Project
Family support worker
Parent's support groups
1:1 at Family centre

Police
DHSS 'sometimes'

Religious

Church
Boys brigade
Sunday School
Church creches

Friends

Neighbours
Other lone parents
Peers
Work colleagues

Others

Local councillor
SENCO and EDCO
Latin American Association
Respite
Affordable Borough Council activities
Aromatherapy course
Literature
Parenting classes
Shops for groceries
Chemist
Chemist collection service
Transport
Community centres

It is clear from the responses to this exercise that a wide variety of people and organisations are seen as important to parents in meeting their family support needs. This differed for different groups of parents depending on whether their experience had been positive or negative. This clearly influenced how they rated particular forms of family support. It was, however, possible to extrapolate some people and organisations as being of particular significance to many parents. These conclusions were based on a quantitative analysis of responses from the focus groups. Those groups and people parents saw as being of most significance are:

- Families
- Friends and neighbours
- Health visitors
- Schools/Teachers
- Churches
- Voluntary and community organisations
- Child care/youth groups

Of these childcare facilities and voluntary and community organisations were cited more times than any other kind of support. All other needs beyond these 7 were mentioned only once or twice. An analysis of the responses from a foster carer's support group would indicate the need for a wide variety of specialist services. The NICEM group's responses, the responses from parents with children with special needs and those of some individual parents from other groups would suggest that the gap that is often left by the absence of extended family is not being filled by support

services. Two quotes from the NICEM focus group are : ‘I don’t feel any organisation helps me in my role as a mother’ and ‘I feel very lonely in the hard role as a mother’.

3. **Parent’s views on the most important and least important sources of family support for them**

The third exercise used with the parent focus groups built on the previous 2 exercises. It asked parents to consider, taking into account their responses to the previous 2 exercises, which organisations/people had been the most important/least important in terms of family support and to rate them accordingly. The following lists represent parent’s responses.

Most important

Family
Friends
Neighbours
Other parents especially in similar situations
Other foster carers
Parent’s support groups
Family support worker
Family support centre
Some social workers
School
Parent’s Association
Child development clinic
Specialist clinic
Counsellors
GP
Health visitor
School nurse
Speech therapist
Midwife
Church
Church organisations
Childminders
Mother&Toddler group
Creche
Nursery
After school group
Babysitter
Summer schemes
Parenting classes re: bilingual children
DHSS: benefits
Community centre
Premature baby unit
Library/internet
Information available
Transport

Least important

Health visitor [1 group]
Church [1 group]
School [1 group]
Homestart [1 group]
GP [1 group]*
‘Dole office’ [1 group]*
Housing [1 group]*

* considered important
but not offering good
service

Special activities for children with disability
Homestart
Harpur's Hill Early Years Project
Sure Start
Barnardos Parenting group
Women's Aid
Parenting Forum
PAC
NSPCC
St Vincent de Paul
Somewhere to meet
Accessible resourced services
Police

In analysing the information gathered it became clear that parents identified the most important sources of support as:

Family	A range of voluntary/community organisations
Friends/neighbours	childcare groups
Health visitor	Schools
GP	

The next most important groups/people mentioned were: parent support groups such as parent & toddler groups, other parents especially those in similar situations, the Church and the Midwife. All other means of support were mentioned by 1 or 2 groups only. Services offered through the statutory sector other than the GP, Health Visitor, Midwife and School were not identified as significant sources of support.

The role of parent, family, extended family and friends as sources of support for parents is of great significance for them. Measures contained in the Family Support Strategy need to take account of the importance of family, friends and local community activity such as childcare provision and voluntary organisation's support groups as sources of support for parents and target resources accordingly.

The NICEM group's responses and parent who have a child with special needs, may suggest the need to fund a more in depth consultation with these parents in order to gain further information on how these needs may best be met.

In terms of the people and organisations deemed to be less important to parents it is noteworthy that several groups did not rate any as less important and that some groups which did qualified their answers. It would seem that a wide range of services are important to parents at different periods in their lives and that some are specific to their particular circumstances. The NICEM group's responses to this question indicate the need for some of these parents to receive additional support from schools.

Parent's views of their support needs in the areas of: Health, Child Protection and Family Support

The 4th exercise aimed to gather information from parents about what services need to exist to help parents within 3 categories:

- Health
- Family Support
- Child Protection

The information on **health** was collated and then broken down into 3 categories:

1. Accessibility issues
2. Need for advice/education
3. Need for additional or enhanced services

Health

Accessibility issues:

Better out of hours service for access to GPs/Health visitors
Better access to healthcare
1 Stop shop
Shorter waiting lists
Shorter waiting lists for minor operations
Shorter waiting times for appointments: doctor and speech therapist
Local dentists/doctors
Nearby health centre
Being able to use milk tokens at the chemist
Bus service to hospitals/health centres
24 hour access to hospitals
Health centre appointments available after hours for working parents and secondary school children
Local A and E Unit
Local hospital
Dungannon Hospital
Quicker access to statementing process
Saturday and late night opening of health centres
Night and weekend dental cover
Inaccessibility of doctors/dentists and opticians for families residing in refuges
Better access to speech therapist for child with special needs

Information and education needs

More information on what services are available
Education on health issues
More advice on childhood illnesses
Free phones for advice
Education on health issues prior to birth
Better and easier access to information

Compulsory 1st Aid classes for parents
More information on the previous medical history of foster children

Additional/enhanced services

Continuity of care from Health Visitor
Better co-ordinated health services
More time with Health Visitor
Regular Health Visitor
More Health Visitors
Health Visitors with better idea of how to support parents from ethnic minority background
Better training for professionals
Take bullying seriously
Better service for applying for benefits
More nutritious school meals
Special GP for children on call
More checks at the baby clinic
More choices about who to receive help from
More support for disabled children
Better relationships between Social Workers/Health Visitors/Parents
Gap in services for 16+ people with a disability
Simpler process for benefits if child has a disability
More speech therapists
Paediatrician working locally
Someone to deal with lone parents when go to GP
Good play areas
More help with school problems/behaviour problems
More choice as to who offers help for mental health problems

Child Protection

The information on **child protection** has been collated and categorised into 2 broad areas:

1. The need for information/advice/training
2. The need for additional or enhanced services

The need for information/advice/training

Need to know where to go for help
1 group commented on the usefulness of the NSPCC's Stranger Danger programme
Child protection training cascaded to parents
How to recognise and respond to abuse
Talks on paedophilia
Awareness training for all on domestic violence, neglect, abuse, bullying and healthy relationships
Increased awareness of the work of Women's Aid, NSPCC, PAC and other relevant groups

Information from the police on who lives in the estate eg sex offenders
Children made aware of Childline
More awareness of existing services for sex abuse
More information for foster carers on foster child's history
Pregnancy awareness
Parent's programmes on bullying, drug awareness and sex education
Access to information by help desk or help line
Free phone numbers: anonymity
Parenting classes for all parents
More training for youth leaders
Locally based information on childminders and the training they have

The need for additional or enhanced services

Getting help if the child or mother has health problems
Not enough social workers and don't always make good decisions
Social workers need to listen to everyone involved and not just the parents
More approachable Social services
Help through schools with bullying
Greater precautions to keep children safe from paedophiles
PSNI more sympathetic to family circumstances
Poverty eradicated: all children well above the poverty line
Safe play areas
Judicial system which protects children from paedophiles
Safe neighbourhood free from fear and intimidation
No bullying, help with dealing with bullying
Safety in rural areas eg traffic signs
More after school clubs, summer schemes, outdoor play areas, playgroups, youth clubs, childcare centres, drop in centres, organised activities and childminders
Speed ramps in housing areas
Free childcare within a safe environment looked after by children who have been police checked
Need for use of residency order within fostering: increasing sense of security for foster children
More preventative services for families at risk
Someone for children to talk to if they have a problem

Family Support

The information on **family support** has been categorised into 3 areas:

1. Need for information/advice/training
2. Need for additional/enhanced services
3. Financial needs

Need for information/advice/training

Guides/videos/CDs/training with real examples of how parents could respond to needs/problems of children at various ages

Use of TV to give information, also Church and parent&toddler groups
Schools could teach children about good manners
Social workers trained in working in partnership with foster carers
Booklet and web site giving up to date information on support groups
Better information about family support/funding available
Greater awareness that parents who look for support are not 'bad' parents
Free benefit help line
Housing Executive could give out information about local groups and activities with tenancy agreement
Advice centre for adults
Help desk to gain information
Training/education classes/parenting groups
Better training for social workers on listening to parents
Training for Housing Executive on domestic violence especially communication
Increase awareness of services that are available: parents sometimes unaware/embarrassed/afraid to seek help
Courses for potential childminders to qualify them to look after children 'out of hours' so they can be paid by lone parents for the service.
Mandatory education for parents on: sex education, drug and alcohol abuse, solvent abuse, crime, teenage pregnancies and life skills

Need for additional finance

Funding for more training for foster carers
Greater support to organisations such as Gingerbread so more lone parents can have access to this service
More effective CSA in following up and ensuring payments are made
Better financial support so it's worthwhile going out to work
More money for Social Services so they won't have to say 'there's no money'
Free access to transport for all school children
Affordable fares: concessions for those on income support
DHSS money when needed
Financial help
Help so Mums can send children to creche/playgroup
Funding/advice/support for support groups to keep them going
Affordable childcare
Free childcare places
Change rules for tax credits so family members can be paid for childminding 'out of hours' such as shift work or weekend work
Free school trips

Need for additional/enhanced services

One stop shop in each town
Space to talk about relationships and caring for others
We need to get together more often like this meeting
Better support from the child's social worker
Better bus service: increased frequency and better service at weekend

More accessible Social Services
 Sure Start in local areas
 No local social worker
 More help for children experiencing difficulties especially from schools
 Support for children whose parents have split up
 Help with completing financial forms
 Better transport services
 Creches at FE College
 Creches for all families
 Agencies to be more user friendly
 Family Planning centres open for all
 Babysitting service
 Someone to look after your child when you have an appointment
 Emergency childcare for parents whose family don't live close by
 More youth/social clubs for teenagers
 Career guidance for teenagers
 More support for teenagers
 More full time childcare places
 No lengthy wait for counselling services
 Accessible library with section for children and creche facilities
 More involvement of parents in developing local community services
 More support for single Mums
 Re-housing
 Facilities: play parks, cinema, swimming pool
 Youth clubs and community facilities for disabled children
 More childminders
 More children's specialists
 More family support workers
 Ability to contact family support worker without going through social worker
 Centre that has various services
 Possibility of government/Social Security agency/GP passing on contact details to appropriate service to allow them to contact lone parent. Parent then has choice whether to take up the service
 More accessible contact centres which are government supported

This exercise demonstrated that parents are looking for a wide variety of types of information/training and advice both for themselves and for professionals from the statutory sector. They feel that this is required across the 3 areas of child protection, health and family support. Parent's answers in the area of child protection demonstrate their very real concerns and desire to increase their knowledge so that their children may be better protected. Safe play spaces and a range of needs for additional affordable childcare facilities were also a common theme. In the area of health accessibility emerged as a strong theme with a number of groups mentioning the inaccessibility of many health services both in terms of opening hours, waiting times for appointments and location of services.

Other information

A final method for gathering the opinions of the parents was to give them an opportunity to add additional comments at the end of the session. The following are the responses from those groups who chose to contribute additional information.

Group 1

- Services are either missing altogether or they are available but not co-ordinated
- Hard to know who to phone on health and social services issues. We get passed from pillar to post
- Parents would like to deal with professionals face to face rather than on the phone with different people

Group 2

- All the women described government agencies as sub standard compared with non- government organisations
- Families who are in receipt of benefits and can't afford to pay for services like childcare, housing, dentist, optician or medical services are treated differently

Group 3

- There looks like plenty of support but we can still feel isolated in the community especially when having family problems
- Help is available but either we don't know about it or we don't feel it is accessible because of the cost or geographical distance

Group 4

- DHSS and Housing Executive are extremely difficult to deal with

Group 5

- We suggest leaflets are sent out by local Council or Health Board providing comprehensive information on existing health services

Group 6

- The group felt that schools are nor supportive of single parents and that single parenthood was used as a reason to blame for any problem a child was having. None would approach the school for help if experiencing problems

Group 7

- Our community feels very isolated: inadequate statutory health services for the area
- We are caught between 2 Boards: Causeway and NEELB. This can cause delays

and problems eg in having a child statemented and the effect this has on the necessary care for that child

- Several Mums have experienced problems with a paedophile in the immediate locality and are unhappy with the support service they received from statutory agencies

Group 8

- Foster carers are not given respect by professional services
- Some good social workers but the consensus was that social workers are often inaccessible and that information is not shared with them in a way that would be helpful and supportive
- Foster carers want professionals to work in partnership with parents

Group 9

- If we learned how to improve our role as parents many problems will be easy to manage. It is important to know where to get this kind of training
- We all mention how hard it is to bring up your family when you don't have your family here – in my home country we say it is hard to nurture when nobody nurtures you. I think that a big problem is the isolation, even worse if you live in a rural area like myself. People are friendly but only acquaintances, not really friends.
- I think school could do more to help us in our role as parents. I would like to know how the school system works, maybe I need to ask but I don't want them to think I am too curious. I think everyone here knows that is why they don't ask. Maybe schools could give more information to foreign parents
- I found it difficult to establish good communication with the teachers. I know I have language difficulties and maybe I don't understand the way of communication. I think we all have to learn how to relate
- I think that schools and the health system have to understand the advantages of children being bilingual. It seems that they are assessing bilingual children in the same way as monolingual children and it is not appropriate

References

Every Child Matters, Government Green paper, September 2003
Lord Northbourne's speech, House of Lords, July 2003

Executive Summary

An overarching Family Support Strategy will contain the vision that all children, young people and families will have a better quality of life and that supporting parents needs to be at the heart of the approach to improving children's lives. In the words of the government Green paper, Every Child Matters, 'the bond between the child and the parent is the most critical influence on the child's life. Parenting has a strong impact on a child's educational development, behaviour and mental health'.

The NHSSB, in partnership with key stakeholders, is tasked with producing a new Family Support Strategy. In order to ensure the views of parents are represented in the Strategy, Parenting Forum[NI] was asked to carry out a consultation with parents across the Board area. Focus groups were convened and used as a means of gathering data. This method brought parents together in a way that allowed them to share their views and to identify key issues and concerns in relation to family support. The sessions were mainly facilitated by Parenting Forum[NI] and PAC staff.

Parents were asked to discuss and record their responses to 4 questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear the term family support?
- What are the significant people/organisations involved in supporting you as parents?
- What are the **most** significant and **least** significant people/organisations involved in supporting you as parents?
- What are your views on the services that need to exist in the following 3 areas:
 - Child Protection
 - Health
 - Family Support

1. Parent's views of what family support means to them

Parents were asked to record what thoughts came to mind when they heard the term 'family support'. The analysis of parent's responses to this exercise will enable other stakeholders to consider parent's views in arriving at a definition of 'family support'.

In analysing the frequency of responses, it became clear that, for many of the groups, parents, family, and extended family equate with the term 'family support'. Schools, Churches, neighbours and friends were also cited by several of the focus groups. Virtually every group mentioned the full range of childcare facilities whilst amongst the Statutory services, GPs and Health Visitors were named. It was also clear that parents equated the term 'family support' with voluntary and community groups with a range of organisations being named. Analysis of the responses from the NICEM group and individual parents from other groups indicate that family is synonymous with the term 'family support' but that the geographical distance of family members hinders this support.

The overall definition of family support emerging from the focus group responses is that it is support that families can access at different times of their lives, more often from other family members. Other forms of support tended to be accessed at times of crisis or change.

2. Significant sources of support for parents

In this second exercise parents were asked to identify significant people and organisations involved in supporting them. In so doing this exercise provided extensive information on those organisations and individuals they consider can best meet their family support needs. The information was then classified into a series of groups.

It is clear from the responses to this exercise that a wide variety of people and organisations are seen as important to parents in meeting their family support needs. This differed for different groups of parents within the groups and depended on whether their experience was negative or positive. It was possible, however, to extrapolate some people and organisations as being of particular significance. These conclusions were based on a quantitative analysis of responses from the focus groups. Those groups and people parents saw as being of most significance are:

- Families
- Friends and neighbours
- Health visitors
- Schools/Teachers
- Churches
- Voluntary and Community organisations
- Child care/youth groups

Of these childcare facilities and voluntary and community organisations were cited more times than any other kind of support. All other needs beyond the above list of 7 were mentioned only once or twice. An analysis of the responses from a foster carer's support group would indicate the need for a wide variety of specialist services. The NICEM group's responses, responses from parents with children with special needs and those of some individual parents would suggest that the gap that is often left by the absence of extended family is not being filled by support services. Two quotes from the NICEM focus group are: 'I don't feel any organisation helps me in my role as a mother' and 'I feel very lonely in the hard role as a mother'.

3. Parent's views on the *most* important and *least* important sources of family support for them

The third exercise used with the parent focus groups built on the previous 2 exercises. It asked parents to consider, taking into account their responses to the previous 2 exercises, which organisations/people had been the most important/least important in terms of family support and to rate them accordingly.

Parents identified the most important sources of support as:

Family	A range of voluntary/community organisations
Friends/neighbours	Child Care groups
Health visitor	Schools
GP	

The next most important groups/people mentioned were: parent support groups such as parent&toddler groups, other parents especially those in similar situations, the Church and the midwife. All other means of support were mentioned by 1 or 2 groups only. Services offered through the statutory sector other than the GP, Health Visitor, Midwife and School were not identified as significant sources of support.

The role of parent, family, extended family and friends as sources of support for parents is most significant for them. Measures contained in the Family Support Strategy need to take account of the importance of family, friends and local community activity such as childcare provision and voluntary organisation's support groups as sources of support for parents and target resources accordingly.

The NICEM group's responses may suggest the need to fund a more in depth consultation with these parents in order to gain further information on how these needs may best be met.

In terms of the people and organisations deemed to be less important to parents it is noteworthy that several groups did not rate any as less important and that some groups which did qualified their answers. It would seem that a wide range of services are important to parents at different periods in their lives and that some are specific to their particular circumstances. The NICEM group's responses to this question indicate the need for some of these parents to receive additional support from schools.

4. Parent's views of their support needs in the areas of: Health, Child Protection and Family Support

The 4th exercise aimed to gather information from parents about what services need to exist to help parents within 3 categories:

- Health
- Family Support
- Child Protection

This exercise demonstrated that parents are looking for a wide variety of types of information/training and advice both for themselves and for professionals from the statutory sector. They feel that this is required across the 3 areas of child protection, health and family support. Parent's answers in the area of child protection demonstrate their very real concerns and desire to increase their knowledge so that their children may be better protected. Safe play spaces and a range of needs for additional affordable childcare facilities were also a common theme. In the area of health accessibility emerged as a strong theme with a number of groups mentioning the inaccessibility of many health services both in terms of opening hours, waiting times for appointments and location of services.

5. Other information

A final method for gathering the opinions of the parents was to give them an opportunity to add additional comments at the end of the session. Their responses can be found in the main body of this report.

Conclusions

The Parenting Forum [NI] was asked by the NHSSB to carry out a consultation exercise with parents. It has developed and successfully implemented a methodology for consulting with parents on their views in relation to family support. The organisation consulted with 130 parents from 16 groups across the Northern Board. Together these parents are parenting 305 children.

Parents across all the focus groups identified family, friends, voluntary activity, childcare/youth organisations as significant sources of support for them. Within the statutory sector, Schools, the Health Visitor and the GP are seen as significant. However the role of family and friend is thought to be of great significance. Childcare and voluntary groups were frequently cited as important sources of support with a number of organisations being named. Targeting resources needs therefore to take this into account.

The NICEM group's responses would suggest the need for specific family support to meet the needs identified and a more in depth consultation with these parents may be indicated.

Few of the focus groups indicated that they saw some services as less significant. It would seem that a wide range of services are important to parents at specific periods of their lives and that this differed for different groups of parents depending on whether or not they had a positive or negative experience of a support service.

In the light of comments made by foster parents and bearing in mind what the government's Green paper, Every Child Matters has to say on the subject of fostering the Strategy may wish to consider specific actions aimed at addressing some of the issues raised.

Parents are looking for accessible user friendly information/advice/training both for themselves and for professionals within the statutory services.

Parents see many services as inaccessible particularly within health. Cost, transport difficulties, location of services and inflexible opening hours were frequently cited as barriers.

Parents have real concern in the area of child protection and are seeking more information, advice and training to protect children. Safe play areas were highlighted by a number of groups.

Parents would like to be informed about the content of the new NHSSB Family Support Strategy. The Parenting Forum[NI] has the appropriate expertise to carry out dissemination of information to parents on the new strategy.

Recommendations

1. Support should be available to all parents not just in a time of crisis or change
2. Parents should be made aware of who their local social worker and health visitor is and their roles and remits
3. Key workers such as health visitors and social workers should be assigned to families with particular needs, for example, those from an ethnic minority background or those who have a child with a special need
4. Access to information for families should be quick, easily available, user friendly, assure anonymity and be provided by an independent group. Information should be made available via a free phone or interactive web site
5. Parents should be provided with appropriate training on key issues at different stages of their children's lives
6. Training should be provided for all professionals in engaging with parents and on the key issues which affect the children and the parents they work with
7. Professionals should have all the information on family background and on the issues affecting the family thus speeding up the process of enabling parents to access help. This would reduce the need for parents to repeat the same information again and again when engaging with different services

