Parent Participation

Information Document

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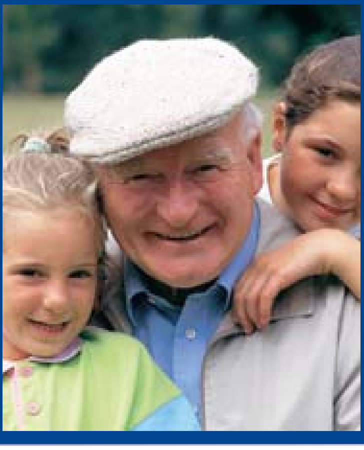
Parenting

Practice Guide for Children and Young People's Partnerships



PLANT A PHOBL IFANC - GWEITHREDU'R HAWLIAU
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE - RIGHTS TO ACTION

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Title of document: Parent participation: Practice Guide for Children and Young People's Partnerships.

Audience: Chief Executives of Local Authorities, Local Health Boards and NHS Trusts; Directors of Education, Social Services, Public Health and Health Visiting; Framework Co-ordinators; Principal Youth Officers; Youth Forums; Key Children's Voluntary Organisations; Commission for Racial Equality; Equal Opportunities Commission; Disability Rights Commission; County Librarians; Community Voluntary Services; Welsh Local Government Association; Police Chief Constables; Wales TUC Cymru; Welsh Local Government Association; Members of the Parenting Action Plan Working Group; Children's Commissioner for Wales.

Overview: This document is aimed at Children and Young People's Partnerships. It seeks to provide a model for parent participation, and gives practical examples and useful resources for involving parents in the work of Partnerships, and in setting up local Parent Networks.

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This document can also be accessed from the Welsh Assembly Government website **www.learning.wales.gov.uk**

Related documents: Parenting Action Plan, November 2005.

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INTRODUCTION

This guide has been produced as part of the Welsh Assembly Government's Parenting Action Plan[1] published in December 2005. The Parenting Action Plan sets out the Assembly Government's existing and planned initiatives to support parenting in Wales. It aims to raise the profile of parenting among policy makers and service providers and to further the development of policies and services to support families in bringing up children.

One of the requirements of the Action Plan is that parents and other carers are enabled to participate effectively in service planning.

This document is aimed primarily at Children and Young People's Partnerships. It seeks to provide a model for parent participation, and gives practical examples and useful resources for involving parents in the work of Partnerships, and in setting up local Parent Networks. We hope that parts of it may also be useful to parents, especially those who are already involved in the work of Partnerships, or would like to be involved.

Using this guide

Section 1 sets out the reasons for involving parents and suggests a model for participation. This is expanded in Section 3, with several practice examples.

Section 2 outlines the barriers to participation and suggests a process for preparing organisations and parents so that barriers can be overcome. Partnerships can use this to evaluate the current stage of their own practice and decide what action they need to take.

Section 4 looks at the role of parent forums and parent networks. This is intended as a reference for anyone considering setting up a network.

Section 5 discusses issues of equality and diversity. It gives information about contacts and resources, which could help partnerships to engage with parents who need additional support or a different approach.

The appendices give the policy and legislative background to parent participation, information about consultation and evaluation methods, a summary of ways in which parents can participate and further useful contacts.

Section 1 WHY PARENT PARTICIPATION? WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Definition of Parents

The term "parents" is used in this document to describe any of the following who play a significant role in bringing up a child: mothers, fathers, foster carers, adoptive parents, step-parents, grandparents and sometimes brothers and sisters or other relatives.

Why involve parents in planning, developing and evaluating services?

The ultimate aim of involving parents is to improve the quality of life of children and their families. Services which are developed in partnership with parents have the potential to be more relevant, better used and more responsive to changing needs.

Parents know their children and have responsibility and accountability for them. They know their local areas and facilities and can identify local issues.

Parents who are well engaged with a service, and feel they have benefited from it, may offer help to others, acting as volunteers, peer educators or peer mentors, creating benefits in the community. There are many good examples of this in Wales.

Over recent years, the Welsh Assembly Government has prioritised initiatives to promote the rights and participation of children and young people.

The Assembly Government has also required the setting up of a Children and Young People's Framework Partnership in each local authority area, to bring together local authorities, the NHS and the voluntary sector to plan services for children, young people and families. They have to make sure that children, young people and their families can take part in their work. This includes parents and children who are in need of specialist services, such as mental health or substance misuse services, so close links are needed with these services.

While no-one would claim that children and young people's participation has yet become routine, a good deal of progress has been made within the Partnerships and their member organisations, to give children and young people a voice. This includes involving them through informal events and use of internet and mobile phone technology, as well as through meetings. Some Partnerships have developed strategies for children and young people's participation. Others have set this as a priority.

There is now a need to develop a similar process for parents, who currently have little representation at a policy and planning level in most Partnerships, despite involvement at a service level.

> "We've been there. We are talking from a knowledge base we've gained over the years." (Parent on a Young People's Partnership)

It is important to remember that Framework Partnerships will be involving children and young people as well as parents in their planning. Partnerships need to be sensitive to the balance of influence between parents and children/young people. Where there are conflicts of interest, decisions must take into account the welfare and rights of the child and the entitlements of young people, as set out in "Extending Entitlement"[2].

Lessons can be learnt from the process of involving young people, but there are also differences. For example, it can be more difficult to find places to access a wide range of parents.

Apart from reasons of good practice, there are legal and policy reasons for involving parents at a strategic level, which are set out in Appendix 1.

Work in this area needs to be seen as part of an overall drive towards empowering the citizen and affirming the rights of the child.

A model of participation

Participation is about being involved in decision-making at all levels. There are a number of models of participation, but most highlight the difference between **information, consultation and participation**. Some describe levels of participation in terms of a ladder, with the power shifting from organisations to service users towards the top of the ladder. Many people think that they have developed user participation when what they have actually developed is consultation. This is only one element of participation.

> Sometimes service users are part of a consultation group to approve of service plans or policies, but this doesn't let service users actually get involved in shaping the plans or policies in the first place" (Carr 2004)[3]

It is important that professionals are clear about what is being offered to parents and that there is a genuine willingness to share decision-making.

For the purposes of this guidance, we are adapting the model developed by Wilcox[4] for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Wilcox describes five levels of participation. In relation to parents, these would be:

- Information - telling parents what is planned.
- Consultation - offering parents some options, listening to feedback, but not seeking any new ideas from them.
- Deciding together - encouraging parents to come up with additional options and providing opportunities for joint decision-making.
- Acting Together - parents and professionals decide together what is the best option and they form a partnership to carry it out.

- Supporting independent action - local groups of parents are offered funds, advice or other support to develop their own agendas, guidelines or services.

The highest level is not always the best place to be - different levels will be right in different circumstances. In practice, there may be actions at different levels at the same time.

An example of how the model would work in practice:

Some parents are on a working group looking at how best to provide family support services in their area. It is decided that a children's centre would meet their needs and the needs of their children (deciding together). Parents are involved in drawing up the plans (acting together).

Once the money is available, parents are involved in recruiting the Centre Manager (acting together). The Centre Manager asks some parents who will be using the service to give their views on colour schemes for the rooms. She wants the centre to feel light and airy, so there are some limits on the range of colours parents can look at. The manager makes the final decision, but she has taken all the parents' views into account and they feel that she has listened (consultation).

Sometimes information or consultation is all that is needed. However, parents should have choices. There should be opportunities to have a real influence at all levels.

The Wilcox model is only one way of looking at participation, but it can help organisations to assess how much of a say parents really have. The Framework Partnerships need to decide on their own definition and work towards:

- Participation at every level of decision making in matters which affect children and parents and
- Giving a wide range of parents a voice.

(Ideas in this document have been adapted from Carr's research (2004) and from two useful guides: Parent Participation: Improving services for disabled children (Council for Disabled children and Contact a Family 2004) and Parent Participation: Improving Services for Children and Families (Family Policy Alliance 2005). Contributions have also been made by parents involved in strategic partnerships in Wales and professionals who support parents.)

Section 2 PREPARING TO INVOLVE PARENTS

Understanding the Barriers

> "If you want parents to be more involved, you've got to ask them what they want" (member of Parent Network)

Barriers for parents can include:

- Parents have many **demands on their time** and those in most need of services may also be those under the most stress. At times, they may not wish to be anything other than a passive recipient of a service and this is their right. However, experience shows that even parents who face considerable hardship may be willing to make a contribution if the support is there and, of course, their circumstances can change over time.
- Some parents feel **alienated from a service** and will not be willing to give feedback or to get involved in other ways. Their views are important, but engaging them is a challenge.
- Some parents **may not use any service** on a regular basis (particularly parents from marginalised groups) so they are "out of the loop" when plans are being made.
- Many parents will be wary of meetings. **Literacy** might be an issue and/or professionals may use a lot of **jargon**, without being aware of it. There can be **gender** issues if one gender is dominant in meetings.
- **Professionals** can seem **very powerful** and intimidating without intending to be and without being aware of it.
- There may be a need for assistance with **access** or **communication**, for example - translation or signing.
- There may be **practical issues** such as transport, childcare or working hours. In a recent survey (not yet published) by Contact a Family in Wales, parents of disabled children identified these issues as the biggest barrier to participation.
- Parents may not feel that their **contributions are valued**, especially if they have been consulted in the past and felt it made no **difference**, time and time again, without anything changing. Disillusionment can quickly set in. A common issue is lack of **feedback** to people who have taken part in a consultation.
- Parents need services at a particular stage in their lives and **then they move on.**
- Parents who are not very articulate or confident need a lot of **support to contribute**. On the other hand, parents who are articulate and confident can find that some professionals do not regard their views as typical of other parents, a no-win situation.

> "In the beginning I felt like a fish out of water as a parent - my knowledge base grew over time" - parent representative on a strategic partnership.

Barriers for professionals can include:

- Participation **takes longer** than just getting things done.
- Unsuccessful efforts to get parents involved **can put people off.**
- **Capacity and resources** may be in short supply and participation has costs.
- The constant **need to engage** new parents as others move on (for example in Early Years services) can put heavy demands on stretched services.
- Organisations which are **not geared up** to participation can make it difficult for individual workers to do what they would like to do.
- There may be extra problems because of the **geographical spread** of families.
- Staff/managers may be anxious about participation because they have had **no training** in participatory practice and techniques.
- Vocal parents can be **intimidating** for staff who don't have experience of participatory approaches.
- There may be a fear that parents will have **wish-lists** for services that cannot be delivered.
- It takes **courage** to invite people to challenge your way of making decisions!

Overcoming the Barriers - a process

Many of the fears about participation can be overcome with good preparation and small steps which demonstrate the value of involving parents. The process below (adapted from Carr 2004) may be helpful in evaluating where you are and what you need to do locally to address the barriers to participation.

a) Decide who will take a lead

Participation needs time and resources. Some services in Wales have developed a culture of participation without a specialist worker, because a strong lead has been taken by a manager or a key member of staff.

However, research on user involvement suggests that real change depends on how much time **all** managers and staff spend listening to service users and getting them involved. (Carr 2004)

Participation is everyone's responsibility, but someone has to drive it forward. Experience in Young People's Partnerships suggests that it may be useful in large organisations or networks to have someone with dedicated time to help develop participation.

Other possible models include:

- identifying participation **champions** in the existing staff/ management group

- setting-up a **steering group** to take forward the participation agenda (some Partnerships have participation sub-groups)
- bringing in **consultants** to “kick-start” the process or help to develop an action plan.

All of these have implications for staff capacity and resources.

The role of a participation development worker

Given the complexity of parenting support, several Partnerships are developing parenting strategies. Some are looking to appoint co-ordinators for parenting work. There may be overlaps between this role and that of participation development worker, but they are different roles. In an ideal world, a single worker would not be expected to have both roles. Where this is the only affordable option, it is important to have very clear expectations and to be realistic about what one person can achieve.

When appointing a participation development worker, decisions are needed about where this person is best placed to have influence in the organisation, how she/he will be supported and trained and how she/he will link with the network of service providers in the area.

b) Ensure that the organisation is committed to participation and that staff are prepared

Make sure there is a common understanding of what participation means - have an agreed definition.

Decide how to meet the costs of participation - such as staff and parent training, expenses for parents, (travel and childcare), the cost of appropriate materials, translation and interpretation.

Make sure all staff understand the value of participation and have the **support to make it work**. This could mean organising training in participatory methods, for staff and managers. It could involve presentations from parents.

Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) hosts Participation Cymru, a unique project in Wales, which was set up to help mainstream participative decision-making in the public and voluntary sectors. It is playing an important role in Communities First and Making the Connections. Participation Cymru provides training, support, information and policy direction in participatory approaches. (mevans@wcva.org.uk; 029 2043 1729 levans@wcva.org.uk) 029 2043 1703

Community Voluntary Councils can provide free training for parents who are attending meetings, such as committee skills and representing the voluntary sector.

Make sure the organisation is **prepared to respond** to user views. How will information from parents be analysed, weighted and used?

Deal with **anxieties about wish lists**. If parents feel included and valued, they can engage in mature discussions about resources and priorities. Many parents give their time in a voluntary capacity, for example as befrienders, peer educators or childcare volunteers.

Be clear about what you want to achieve and any **limits** there might be.

Be aware of **power** relationships - you may not feel powerful, but, in this context, you are. Conscious efforts have to be made to balance the power in the relationship.

> "Some organisations are used to working alongside parents. Others aren't and may look at it as a bit of a threat. Sometimes it takes time for people to see the value of having parents there." (parent on a Children's Partnership)

Decide how to **measure success.**

Look at the format of **meetings**. Are they parent-friendly? (see text box on parent-friendly meetings p.13)

c) Map existing parents' groups and services in your area

Look for **parent groups and services in your area** and make links with them as a starting point. Voluntary and community groups are often well placed to assist with consultation and may be aware of parents who want to contribute their ideas.

Identify groups of **parents for whom there are no local support groups.** It will need additional effort to engage with them. Otherwise, the same people continue to be excluded. Local decisions need to be made about who will take responsibility for this. (For more information about engaging excluded groups, see Section 5).

Share success - there will probably already be some in your area. Make sure people are aware of good practice. Suggestions include disseminating good practice through websites, newsletters and staff meetings.

d) Work with a group of parents to develop participation principles and standards

(The mapping exercise described above should identify a group of parents willing to get involved.)

Standards ensure that everyone knows what to expect and they demonstrate organisational commitment. Some services have developed a Charter for User /Carer Involvement which outlines both principles and standards.

The Welsh Assembly Government does not want to set detailed standards for the participation of parents, as the process of drawing up standards and making them relevant to your circumstances is as important as what the standards say. They have to be negotiated and be achievable.

We are recommending that Partnerships work with some local parents to develop a set of principles and standards which are realistic and which a range of parents can understand.

Standards should cover: why participation matters, how parents can expect to be involved, what support they can expect, (such as training, expenses, preparation for meetings, appropriate timing of meetings), how they will get feedback and what they can do if they are unhappy with the way they are being involved. The examples of principles and standards below might be helpful in developing your own.

The Care Council has developed draft standards for user/carer participation. These were developed with users and carers and are currently out for consultation. The final version will be on the Care Council website later in 2006. (www.ccwales.org.uk)

The Welsh Assembly Government has published a user/carer charter and standards for involvement in mental health services. There is a useful checklist for the standards which could be adapted. ("Stronger in Partnership - Involving service users and carers in the design, planning delivery and evaluation of mental health services in Wales" Policy implementation guidance 2004, Appendix 3)

The Participation Unit has worked with young people to draw up some user-friendly draft standards for their participation.
(Save the Children 029 2039 6838)

e) Build the capacity of parents to participate

Encourage a culture of participation within local organisations.

Effective participation starts with the way parents are treated when they use a service or make an enquiry. If their views are listened to and respected from the first contact and if they are given choices, some of the groundwork is done.

This approach can apply to statutory work, as well as non-statutory work, for example, in Family Group Conferencing, in Gwynedd and elsewhere - an approach in which extended families are supported by professionals to make decisions about the welfare and care of a child.

Projects and services which have a culture of participation can do a great deal to build the confidence of disadvantaged parents. They can give them experience of participating in meetings and making joint decisions. This can feed into partnership at a strategic level.

When parents agree to join a Partnership, they will need induction and support and may want training. Provision of support and training needs to be considered in advance.

Parents need the **same information** as everyone else to work from, but keep it simple.

Be **flexible** about different ways of working. Sitting in a formal meeting and dealing with papers will only appeal to a minority of parents, but others can be involved in different ways (for example, some Partnerships have presentations from service user groups. Others have Parent Networks.)

Make sure that the **costs** of participating are met.

f) Think about all the opportunities for parents to be involved and put systems in place to ensure participation at every level

Section 3 of this guidance gives detailed examples of opportunities to participate, using the Wilcox model.

g) Monitor and evaluate parent participation

Recent research has identified a gap in information about the impact of participation on services (Carr 2004). Carr recommends that monitoring and evaluation techniques should be developed with service users. One example of how this has been done is included in the Care Council draft standards.

The Care Council has undertaken to monitor service user and carer involvement in its work and to publish an annual progress report. The suggested measures of success are: service user feedback; growth in the contacts database; an increase in the numbers and diversity of service users and carers participating in Care Council activity. They also undertake to evaluate what changes have taken place as a result of user input.

Partnerships should consider how they will measure progress, not just in the numbers of parents getting involved, but whether they are managing to reach a wider range of parents and what difference is being made to decision making.

Making Meetings Work for Parents*

Practicalities

Ensuring that meetings are held at convenient times

Covering the costs of transport, childcare and any other expenses (be proactive - parents may be too embarrassed to ask).

Convenient, accessible venues.

Preparation - a straightforward explanation of what the partnership group does, what the meetings are for, who attends, how often they are held, how long they last and how the parent can play a role. (This includes: getting items on the agenda, protocols for speaking in meetings, what is and is not confidential, when they can expect to get minutes.)

If a parent can afford the time, an induction process to look some of work supported by the partnerships could be very helpful.

Helping parents to contribute, make introductions and give everyone name labels.

Keep paperwork short and simple.

> "The minutes were like Double Dutch to me – it was all jargon and abbreviations" (parent on a partnership group)

Use formats which are relevant to the needs of the parents (this may include interpreters, signers, large print documents, depending on the parent's needs).

Ban jargon (have a pre-arranged signal or a card that parents can hold up in meetings when there is something they don't understand. Provide a glossary of abbreviations or explain them when they are used).

Ensure that parents have a chance to speak, without putting them on the spot.

Don't dismiss contributions, ensure that the parents feel valued.

Thank everyone for their contributions at the end of the meeting.

Teambuilding events/awaydays can be helpful but should be arranged to suit parents.

Make sure parents who are acting as representatives get papers in time to consult other people (this applies to professionals as well).

Have a review after a period of time, to see how things are working from the parents' point of view.

*adapted from guides previously referenced.

Section 3 FIVE LEVELS OF PARENT PARTICIPATION - PUTTING THE MODEL INTO PRACTICE

Level One - INFORMATION

Parents want and need information, for example, about what services are available locally or what is planned. They need to know what their entitlements are. They should be able to receive information and services without having to participate any further, if this is what they want.

a) What information?

- Information about local services

Parents who contributed to this guidance highlighted **lack of information for parents** as a major issue. They felt that professionals should have up-to-date directories of local services, support groups, organisations providing advice etc, and they wanted all professionals to be **more pro-active** in telling parents what is available. Some Partnerships are working on this, for example Conwy Partnership is preparing a directory of parenting services.

A useful source of information is the local Children's Information Service, which is a statutory requirement. The Welsh Assembly Government's vision for Children's Information Services is that they are a strong, visible and mainstream part of Local Authority provision, widely understood and used by families.

Parents may want information about how to challenge a decision made by a service provider, such as a school or LEA. Professionals should be in a position to signpost organisations which can support parents to make a challenge, such as SNAP Cymru (see details in Section 4).

- Information about children's needs and parenting

This can be written or can be given through information sessions. Parents may be reluctant to approach agencies directly, for fear of being seen as failing in some way, or because of experiences in their own lives. Being able to access information in other ways can be very helpful.

In Rhondda Cynon Taff, pre-school information sessions for parents of two year olds have drawn in large numbers of parents (up to 50 per session). They start with an informal session at the school and parents are asked what advice/information they would like at the next meeting. Information sessions have also been held in various communities, based on a survey of parents' main concerns.

- Information about planned developments

Information can also be about planned developments. Sometimes showing people an example of what is planned is more effective than telling them. This can be a starting point for more active involvement:

Staff from Cardiff Surestart began to develop a space in Ely Baptist Hall as a sensory room for children using their stay and play group.

They realised that parents hadn't been consulted and arranged to take them to a Children's Centre in Bristol to see a sensory room and to understand its purpose. Armed with this information, the parents then helped to make the equipment and decorate the room.

> "This took much longer than having the staff undertake the task, but the benefits gained from the parents and children being involved in the design and implementation have been enormous" (Surestart Officer).

b) Ways of publicising information

The challenge with information-giving is having systems which ensure **that information reaches as many parents** as possible, taking into account the **different ways in which people are able to access it.** This includes issues of language, literacy, gender, visual impairment and the best places to advertise information to different audiences

Parents can be valuable allies in producing **user-friendly information.** Many projects and services involve parents in designing information.

There needs to be a variety of ways of sharing information, to reach a variety of parents:

- Directories and websites (which have to be kept up to date)
- Word of mouth - for example, cascading information through community groups and local organisations working with parents and children
- Articles in community newsletters and local papers
- Information videos and DVD's

For bigger initiatives:

- Visual materials, displays and leaflets in public buildings, doctors surgeries etc
- talking to people at the school gates and in local parks, as well as public meetings
- using local radio or television

Level Two - CONSULTATION

> "Consultation isn't just about attending meetings" (member of Parent Network)

Issues to Consider

Before consulting:

- In the Wilcox model there is a difference between consultation (where parents are asked their views on a limited range of options) and deciding together (where parents can suggest alternatives and be part of the decision-making process). Be clear about what you are asking of parents. What can they influence and what can they not influence?
- Use available information from recent research or local surveys where possible. Parents are willing to be consulted but want the information to be used. Parents of disabled children, in particular, sometimes feel that they are answering the same questions time and again, with no obvious benefit.
- Will there be more chance of reaching your target group of parents if a voluntary organisation, parent network or independent consultant is involved? This is especially important for groups which are under represented. (See section 5).

Methods of consultation:

There is a variety of ways of consulting parents (as well as children and young people). Local authorities will have expertise on consultation methods through their role in developing Community Strategies.

A comprehensive list of methods, including advantages and disadvantages can be found on
www.idea- knowledge.gov.uk/idk/aio/68967

Some examples of common consultation methods are given in Appendix 3.

As every method has its limitations and because some parents may respond more to one kind of consultation than another, it is advisable to use a **range of methods** and aim to reach **a range of parents.** Local organisations and services can help.

Once you have consulted:

- How will you use the information? Will you act on the majority view? How will you make sure that minority groups have their views taken into account?
- How will you provide feedback to parents? Some Partnerships are already thinking about how to make feedback to parents more systematic. Feedback is an essential part of the process.

Opportunities for Consultation

At a service level:

- Parents can be given choices about the services they use

Many services have groups of parents who are involved in the planning of programmes and activities. Sometimes there are parent committees or parent forums which take on this role, and sometimes parents get involved in raising the funds to make the activity possible.

Often, parents are choosing from a given menu of services, but in some cases they are able to influence new developments.

Ynys Cynon Early Years Centre has a Parents' Forum once a term. Meetings are advertised within the centre and any parent can attend. Some parents act as representatives for anyone who wants an issue raised, but can't attend, or is nervous about speaking up. The Head of the Centre will also raise issues on parents' behalf and she makes herself available to parents for an informal chat. There is a comments box in the reception area of the centre. Parents can raise any issues they want to in the forum, but much of the discussion has been about services which parents have felt they needed. As a result, childcare has been developed in after-school hours and school holidays.

- Parents can give feedback on the services they use

Systems for service user feedback need to be part of every service. Some services involve parents, children and young people in an annual review and forward planning process, particularly in the larger voluntary organisations.

Some methods of involving parents in feedback about services are discussed in Appendix 3.

- Parents can be given opportunities to make complaints or comments

Complaints can also provide useful feedback. It is important that parents are helped to use complaints systems and that information from complaints is used constructively. Feedback should be given about how complaints information has been used.

- Parents can contribute to Inspections and Reviews

There is an increasing emphasis on involving service users and carers in a range of Inspections and in Joint Reviews (which look at all the work of a Local Authority). For example, the Social Services Inspectorate for Wales has produced guidance on setting up user/carer reference groups for Joint Reviews.[7] A handbook and leaflets are available which explain what the Joint Review is all about and what service users are being asked to do.

Groups of parents of 11-20 year olds, who had taken part in "Lets talk" parenting programmes through Monmouthshire Youth Service were brought together for an evaluation exercise as part of the Young People's Partnership inspection (by Estyn). Two parents attended from each course. Staff made introductions and made a presentation, but the rest of the exercise was an informal discussion between parents and the inspector, which gave parents a chance to say what they had liked, or not liked, about the course and what they had got out of it. Parents found this an enjoyable experience and it provided useful feedback to the service and to the Inspectorate.

- Parents can make a very useful contribution to research

It is important that they understand how their information is going to be used and how their anonymity will be protected. They must give informed consent.

Researchers should consider issues such as transport, timing of interviews, childcare and payment of expenses for parents taking part. Parents should have feedback about the research findings and, where possible, have a copy of the research or a summary (if they want it).

Parents who were being supported by Rhondda Cynon Taff Youth Offending Service agreed to take part in research by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence. They went to a consultation meeting in London to give their views about what helps parents to become and stay engaged in parenting programmes. The results were incorporated in to a published report, "Parents' Views"[8] which is designed to influence policy and practice. Parents found it an empowering experience.

At a Partnership level

Parents can be asked about their own and their children's needs to inform strategies and plans. (Children and young people's views should also be taken into account.)

In Ceredigion, parents were consulted about children's emotional health and wellbeing. Groups of parents were asked what they understood by emotional and mental wellbeing for children and young people, where they got their information and what services they would like to see. These views informed an action plan and a conference was held, with parents taking part.

- Parents can be involved in evaluating existing services/pilot services

The Torfaen Community Focused Schools childcare project is a pilot project (Welsh Assembly Government/Department of Work and Pensions) testing the idea that lack of affordable childcare is a significant barrier to lone parents going to work.

Before-and-after-school childcare has been developed for lone parents in a number of schools and links have been developed with childminders.

A social research organisation is evaluating the pilot project. They have carried out telephone and face-to-face interviews with childcare providers, Local Authority staff, Jobcentre Plus staff and schools. The next phase is the parents' evaluation.

A questionnaire will be sent to parents, with a letter for them to complete if they do not want to be contacted by phone or do not want to have an interview.

It has been recommended that parents have a "thank you" gift voucher for taking part in the evaluation process. Lone parents who did not take part in the pilot and non-lone parents will also be interviewed.

Level Three - DECIDING TOGETHER

Asking parents for their views is an important element of participation, but it is also possible to go a step further and involve parents in making decisions. Decisions should be based on their own views, views collected from other parents and the knowledge and experience of professionals.

a) Deciding together at a Service level

- Parents can be members of Parent Panels, Parent Committees, Management Committees

Services vary in the amount and level of shared decision-making. Parent panels and parent committees may be about planning and reviewing day to day activities. In some services, parents are involved in more strategic decisions.

Pontlottyn Family Centre has structures to enable parents and young people to be involved in decision making on a regular basis (every three months). There is a Young People's Group, an Adult Service User Group and a Project Committee. The Project Committee has representatives of both these groups, alongside funding partners and other professionals. Group meetings are held a week before management committees to allow ideas to be fed in.

When parents raise an issue, staff have open discussions about the resources available and any obstacles.They will work with parents to decide on the way forward. Often parents will help to run any activities which they have requested. If something can't be done, staff explain the reasons and parents are generally understanding: "To be honest, they don't come up with unreasonable requests." (Project Manager)

The issue of representation can be difficult ."It's finding a balance between consistency and people feeling comfortable, but not having the same people there for evermore." (Project Manager) To deal with this, there has to be a minimum of one past service user and one current service user at the Management Committee.

Young people can be accompanied by their worker if they wish and there is a notice board for feedback. Parents and young people often make up half the committee.

b) Deciding together at a Partnership level

Practitioners in more than one area have commented that parents become confident through contact with a service, but the mechanisms are not in place to give them a voice at a strategic level.

Several Partnerships are actively looking at different models of involving parents, such as parent networks and parent forums.

Having parents sitting on Partnership groups is an important element of participation at a strategic level. (This needs to be in addition to wider consultation.)

There are a number of questions for partnerships to ask themselves when inviting parents to join meetings:

- Which parents should sit on partnership groups?

Experience in Torfaen and Caerphilly suggests that it is easier to sustain involvement when a parent is representing a group and has support from that group. If they are representing a group, they will need to be helped to gather information and to feed back to their peers.

- How many parents?

The literature referenced in this guidance suggests a minimum of two.

- How will they be invited to join?

Will there be a selection or election process?

- How will they be prepared and supported?

Someone needs to be identified to take responsibility for this.

- How will equality and diversity be monitored?

There is a danger of services continuing to be inappropriate for some groups of parents if their views are never represented.

- Should involvement be time-limited?

One parent who had been on a strategic group for long time said that she felt she was starting to see things from a professional point of view, rather than from a parent's point of view.

Below are some examples of ways in which parents can be involved:

- Parents can be represented on working groups developing strategies and plans

This includes family support strategies, parenting strategies, childcare or play strategies.

Conwy Partnership ran a morning workshop for parents on parenting support. This led to an action plan for targeted services and also led to involving three of the parents on a steering group to develop Conwy's parenting strategy.

- Parents can be on steering groups designing new services.

They will have local as well as personal knowledge, which can inform new services.

Parents in Flintshire Surestart services were involved in the design of a new Family Centre. Plans were taken to them at every stage and they were able to make changes and contribute ideas. Their involvement continued until completion of the building, when they were able to choose colour schemes and furniture. Parents also have an ongoing say in what activities and services are provided.

In Merthyr Tydfil, there is a parent on the management panel of the new Integrated Children's Centre, which will have a key role in the planning and delivery of local services. Other Children's Centres have also parent representatives.

- Parents can be members of strategic partnerships

There is considerable variation in parent membership of strategic partnerships. In some areas there are no identified places for parents, in others there are parents on some subgroups, particularly subgroups for disabled children's services. A small number of parents (mainly parents of disabled children) are members of Children's Partnerships or Young People's Partnerships. In two areas, there are parents on the overarching Framework Partnerships.

There needs to be more systematic inclusion of parents in meetings where major decisions are taken. This may take some time to achieve, but it needs to be a goal which is worked towards.

Level Four - ACTING TOGETHER

There are a number of ways in which parents can take a more active role in developing and managing services.

- Parents can be involved in recruitment and selection of staff

There should be an expectation of service user involvement in recruiting staff. This could include giving information to candidates, involvement in selection processes and involvement in the induction of new staff.

Preparation is essential, so that parents understand the principles of equal opportunities recruitment and selection. Thought needs to be given to what will happen if parents' views differ from those of professionals and to whether or not parents should be paid for their time. At the very least, parents should receive expenses.

Ynys Mon Rural Families Service has a Parents' Panel, with representatives from different outreach groups. The parents are trained in equal opportunities recruitment and help to recruit new staff. They also act as a reference group for parent information and consultations.

In Cardiff Surestart, staff wanted to engage parents in the recruitment of a playworker, but knew that some parents would be unhappy taking part in a formal interview process.

They arranged a twenty minute play session for parents and children, in which candidates took part. Parents were asked to rate candidates on a simple 1 to 5 scale for:

- Warmth towards the children
- Communication with parents
- Participation in play

There was also a parent on the interview panel.

The parents' scores were taken into account in the appointment process and parents found it a satisfactory process. There was complete agreement between parents and professionals on the choice of candidate, but any difference of opinion would have been dealt with through open discussion of how scores were allocated.

- Parents can produce information and educational materials

Parents are well placed to provide information and educational materials from their own experiences. Resources are needed to produce quality materials, but some projects have reduced costs by making links with local colleges and having videos/DVD's made by students.

Parents from Neath Port Talbot Parenting Matters made a video about their parenting courses, showing some of their groups in action. Parents were fully involved in the process and the idea came from them identifying: lack of recruitment materials, parents' anxieties about coming to a group and the need to show what actually happens in a group.

- Parents can be involved in staff training

Parents have a lot to offer in the induction and training of staff. The Care Council for Wales has developed standards for involving service users in the training of Social Workers. Other professions can also benefit from hearing the experiences of parents and their children.

Parents from Caerphilly Children's Centre (a multi-disciplinary centre for disabled children) have been involved in training for medical staff and midwives at Neville Hall Hospital in Abergavenny and Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport. They have also made presentations to Physiotherapists at the School of Medicine at Cardiff.

They have contributed to professionals' understanding of how early diagnosis should be delivered and the importance of early counselling for parents of disabled children.

- Parents can co-run activities

Parents are often willing to help organise the activities they want for themselves and their children. They may help in crèches, playschemes, trips, etc. Many services ensure that parents are offered accredited training for this which gives them a basis for future employment (for example, food handling, IT, childcare).

Flintshire Surestart has parents acting as volunteers in the toy library, food co ops and production of a regular newsletter.

- Parents can offer time and support to others as course facilitators or parent mentors

Some parents who have benefited from a service want to put something back, by supporting other parents. Organisations like Homestart are based on parent-to-parent befriending, but others are also developing this, as part of a menu of services.

Flintshire Surestart, Swansea Surestart and Carmarthenshire Surestart have all developed schemes in which service users have gone on to become volunteers, supporting other parents. In Flintshire, trained “community parents" offer monthly support at home, using a method called “one to one”. In Carmarthenshire, trained parent volunteers offer support at home or in groups. In Swansea, parents co-run parenting courses and mentor other parents. Some are now also involved in “training the trainers”. In all these examples, parents have been fully involved in developing the schemes.

In Torfaen, a group of mothers who had suffered from postnatal depression were involved in putting together a programme of support for other sufferers (“Sunshine Seekers”). Many mothers have benefited from the programme. Some of them are now being assisted by the Surestart Health Co-ordinator to organise the planning, training and support of a volunteer network, which they will call Friendly Faces.

Level Five - SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT ACTION

Flintshire Children’s Information Service helped a group of parents to set up a voluntary parent and toddler group (“The Jugglers”). They were given support to apply for funding and provided with a venue free of charge. As well as running their own group, these parents now act as a reference group to the Information Service.

In Newport, Cwtsh Plus is a family support group for families who have a disabled child or a child with other additional needs. It began as part of Surestart, but has been supported to become an independent, voluntarily managed group, employing its own crèche workers.

Parent-run services

- Parents can be supported and/or funded to run their own services

This should not be a way of providing services on the cheap. Parents can gain useful experience and a sense of empowerment if they choose to run their own services and are supported to do so.

- Parents can be supported and/or funded to run their own networks and forums.

The range and purpose of Parent Forums

There are many different terms to describe regular meetings of parents - parent councils, parent panels, parent forums, parent federations. The purpose of these groups varies, but many are principally there to support and inform members. A majority of them are groups for parents of disabled children or children with other additional needs. Some act as pressure groups as well as support groups. Section 4 looks at the role of parent forums and parent networks in making a contribution to strategic planning.

Section 4 PARENT FORUMS AND PARENT NETWORKS

There is a history, in a few areas of Wales, of Parent Forums which provide representatives for groups planning disability services - for example, Cardiff and Vale Parents' Federation:

Cardiff and Vale Parents' Federation has a long history of involvement in planning services. The Federation is run by and for parents and carers of children or adults with learning disabilities. As well as providing information and support for parents and carers, the Federation sends representatives to a number of strategic planning groups. They have been involved in a number of key projects, such developing play activities for disabled children, and flexible respite care services.

They have also contributed to "avoiding radical changes that would damage services and people's lives" (parent). They feel they have done this by being a constant "thorn in the side", scrutinising proposed changes and fighting for the best interests of people with learning disabilities and their families.

More recent examples include "Parent Carers United" in Merthyr Tydfil (supported by SNAP Cymru).

Other parent groups have sprung from the growth in parenting education and support in the last few years. Parents who have used services often want to remain involved. These groups tend to be linked to projects.

Some new Parent Forums are starting to be developed to inform the work of Framework Partnerships.

Parentlink in Blaenau Gwent has been set up to consult parents, through workshops, on particular issues such as safe play. Workshop topics were identified through a questionnaire to parents. A steering group has been set up to take this work forward.

In two areas, Parent Networks have been established as a structure for involving parents at a strategic level in the Partnerships, including providing parent representatives to sit on Partnership groups. The role of the specialist worker in these areas is to co-ordinate and develop the network.

Given the level of interest in Parent Networks, it was decided to describe the existing Networks in some detail and to highlight some of the learning from them.

What are Parent Networks?

Parent Networks exist in different forms in different countries but in Wales, one of their main purposes is **to help parents to have voice in decision-making at a strategic level.** They also have a role in providing support, information and events for parents.

Parent Networks differ from other parent Forums in that:

a they have a specific brief to help parents to influence policy and service development, including sending representatives to Partnership groups.

b they do not represent one special interest group of children or parents - for example, parents of disabled children or parents with mental health issues. They aim to represent the interests of as wide a range of parents as possible.

Two Networks currently exist in Wales. The one in Caerphilly was the first of its kind in the UK and the one in Neath Port Talbot was the second. Other Partnerships are looking at the possibility of setting up something similar.

Although Parent Networks are a model which the Welsh Assembly Government wishes to encourage, it is important for each Partnership to build on what is already happening locally and to use models which fit local purposes. The key requirement is that the models are based on what local parents want and that they help parents to play a part in the decisions about relevant services.

Caerphilly Parent Network

History and Purpose of the Network

The commitment "to consult with parents and to encourage their involvement"[9] came originally from the Caerphilly Children and Families Services Network (set up by Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations, 1999). It was recognised that there was a need to have representation of parents, both on this group and on the multi-agency planning partnerships which were being set up.

A parent consultation process was set up to look at the issues, and to "kick start" a parents' representation panel. This was funded through Surestart, the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership and Children and Youth Partnership.

- The panel would have members covering the geographical area of Caerphilly County Borough and reflecting the diversity of the population, including ethnicity, gender and disability.
- It would ensure that all the parents had access to relevant information so that they could take part in informed debate.

- It would offer training to parents to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence, so that they could participate fully in meetings.
- Attendance at meetings would be supported by providing transport and childcare if needed.

Eighty-six parents were consulted across the County Borough. Most were already linked to groups or projects. Parents were enthusiastic about identifying their own support needs and many wanted more information about what was available in their own areas. However, there was reluctance to get involved beyond their own locality, except for a small number of parents, who were willing to act as representatives for the rest of their group. These representatives were involved in the development of what is now called Caerphilly Parent Network.

A co-ordinator was appointed and the Network was hosted firstly by GAVO and then by an early years project, Right From The Start.

Initially, funding was short-term, with different sources of money for different pieces of work. Some parent support groups were part of the co-ordinator's role, but this has now changed. The emphasis is now much more clearly on the work with strategic Partnerships and the Network is funded entirely through Cymorth (Welsh Assembly Government funding which the Children and Young People's Partnerships manage). It is about to become an independent charitable organisation.

An assistant has recently been appointed for the co-ordinator, because of the workload.

Caerphilly Parent Network today

There are currently around forty members of the Network and others who access their website for information. A core of about twenty parents have regular involvement and a smaller number act as representatives on the Children's Partnership, Young People's Partnership, Early Years and Childcare Development Partnership and a number of Locality Theme Groups.
The Network is often asked to provide parent representatives for other service planning groups.

Members are well-known in their local areas and provide information to their local contacts. Some are members of other parents' groups, such as Caerphilly Aspergers Group. Others are approached in their communities by people who want to raise issues.

The Network holds two kinds of meetings: one is an informal get-together, with lunch and a relevant guest speaker, the other is a "business meeting," where parents who are on strategic Partnership groups can give feedback and prepare for their next meetings. This preparation and support is an important role for the Network.

Network members also respond to local and national consultations - either in person, or by sending in their views.

Training has been made available for parents who want it, mainly through GAVO for example, committee skills, project planning, representing the voluntary sector.

The Network also produces a newsletter and a website, and supports a fathers' group.

Members of the Network and their views

Members reflect a cross section of the community - men and women, lone parents and non-lone parents, parents with different ages of children, a disabled parent, step-parents, grandparents, parents from different localities, parents with and without professional qualifications. The main gap in representation is Black and Minority Ethnic parents, which is seen as a difficult issue to address, given the very small percentage of BME families in the local population. (See Section 3 for more information about involving BME parents.)

What motivates parents to become members of the Network and what do they gain?

The Network operates on a number of different levels:

- As a support group
- As a source of information
- As a resource for personal development, through the training provided and the opportunities to gain knowledge skills and experience

Different people have different reasons for getting involved. For some, support and information is the most important aspect of the Network. For others, the opportunity to go to meetings to help improve things for other parents is the main motivator. Many parents want to develop their employment skills while they are at home bringing up children. Word of mouth has been important in recruiting to the Network.

> "I'm here to help with the strategic view and getting points across to Local Authorities, the Welsh Assembly etc. What happened to us, we wouldn't wish on our worst enemy. There must be many, many parents like us who need help. I feel like I'm putting something back."(Parent of a teenager with Aspergers.)
>
> " I think every parent in the Borough is entitled to the same things. There shouldn't be this postcode lottery."
>
> "I'm a professional volunteer!!"
>
> "Lots of people who have left the Network have gone into jobs. I can keep up skills through the Network while I'm at home with the children."

Parents are able to get involved at their own pace and some may never attend strategic Partnership meetings. They may be happy to receive information and to use the Network for support.

Others gain confidence over time, attend training courses, go to conferences and gradually increase their knowledge. They may then be enthusiastic about trying to make a difference at a strategic level.

What do parents say about attending strategic meetings?

Parents see themselves very much as representatives and not just there to express their own views. This can be an issue if papers arrive at the last minute.

- It takes time to feel comfortable in meetings and to be able to express a view.
- Some people felt that they had to be very persistent to be heard and they thought that parents with a professional background might be listened to more readily than those without.
- Others felt that it takes time for professionals with little experience of parent participation to understand the value of it. Participation at meetings increases over time, as professionals realise parents have a useful point of view.
- All agreed that jargon and abbreviations could cause problems for many parents in understanding the meeting. It takes confidence to ask for an explanation. Sometimes, parents come back to the Network Co-ordinator for an explanation, until they have gained confidence in the meeting.

> “ There needs to be a connection between Joe Public and all these people higher up.”

> “ Some professionals might feel threatened, but we aren't a lobby group. We give reasoned opinions and are prepared to listen as well.”

What impact do parents feel they have had?

Parents who provided information for this guidance document were able to identify changes made as a result of their input. Examples include the following:

- A parent representative raised concerns about the low level of qualification of community tutors teaching counselling in the community - as a result, the minimum qualification was set at Diploma level.
- Parents involved in a recent strategic discussion about childminding were able to point out that the problem was not the number of childminders, but lack of information for parents about childminding. This has led to a publicity campaign being considered.

- A parent was asked to carry out a consultation on childcare needs. The results were used in planning.

Parents have been able to bring practical examples to discussions about disabled children, homeless young people and complaints processes in health and social services. They have put a strong emphasis on the needs for parents to be given information and they have taken a role in sharing information with other parents.

> "I feel I've been listened to and I've seen results."
>
> "At the strategic level, we are getting across and they are welcoming the voice of the parent.
>
> We are well qualified and well equipped"
>
> "Professionals are now starting to use the Network as an ally, and a pressure group, to get more resources."
>
> "There is strength in numbers"

Future developments

With an extra member of staff, it will be possible for the Network to strengthen its links with other parents' groups - for example parents in the new Flying Start areas. It is recognised that there is a need for more parents to be encouraged, trained and supported to represent the Network on strategic Partnerships.

Contact details for Caerphilly Parent Network:

Anne Fritter
Tel 02920868064
caerphillypn@btconnect.com
www.parentcaer.org.uk

Neath Port Talbot Parent Network

History and purpose of the Network

In 2002, a group of professionals involved in parenting support in Neath Port Talbot were looking at ways to get parents more involved in policy and planning groups. A steering group was set up with parents and professionals and in 2003 a feasibility study was carried out, funded through Cymorth.

As a result, a Parent Network Development Officer was recruited in August 2004. Initially, this initiative is hosted by Barnardos, but the intention is that it will become independent eventually.

The Network had a public launch in 2005, with The Ultimate Parent Event. A national event, run in conjunction with Caerphilly Parent Network. About 400 parents attended the event, which had a variety of relevant stands and activities.

An advisory group has been set up for the Network.

Neath Port Talbot Parent Network today

Any parent living in Neath Port Talbot, who has a child aged 0-25 years, can access the Network.

The aims of the Network are:

- to involve parents in relevant policy/planning decisions (Motto - “decisions with us, not for us”);
- To develop a supportive network of parents who can offer each other friendship, advice, somewhere to share feelings and not be judged.

Existing groups were for parents with specific needs, but, like Caerphilly Network, this one caters for a wide range of parents.

The Network is not a direct service provider, but the development worker sends out information related to children and parenting through a newsletter and a website. The website is getting between 250 and 450 hits per month.

The worker also offers advice/brokerage to parents having difficulty accessing information or services.

Policy and planning

The aim is to have a core group of parents, who would meet monthly or bi-monthly, to look at the minutes and agendas of a range of strategic Partnerships meetings and to discuss the agenda items as a panel. One person would then represent the panel at the Partnership meeting, according to their interests. Childcare, transport, lunch and free training are on offer to parents who join the group.

Recruiting parents to this panel is proving more challenging than expected and it is likely to be a long, slow process.

Other activity has taken place to feed in parents’ views to planning processes - for example, a county-wide survey was undertaken to establish parents' views on whether they felt they currently had any say in service planning and what their priorities would be. (Parents felt that, on the whole, they were not consulted about their needs. Their main priorities would be childcare and safer parks and recreation.) The Development Worker is currently looking at the best ways to take this forward.

Developing a support network

Much activity has taken place to engage parents. Apart from the Ultimate Parent event, there have been local “get-togethers” with a crèche, to inform parents about the Network and to give them an opportunity to socialise. There is a mailing list of 50 - 60 parents for the newsletter. Other copies are distributed through organisations and can be downloaded from the website. Volunteers take copies out to GP surgeries. Articles are written on topical issues, such as legal changes to parental responsibility and domestic abuse of men.

Projects planned for 2006 include a pilot in two schools to increase parental involvement.

Funding will be made available, and it will be up to parents and the schools how they want to take this forward.

Also planned are workshops for parents on presentation skills and partnership working.

The Network co-ordinator currently sits on a number of strategic meetings.

Future developments

It has been recognised that outreach to parents’ groups needs to be regular and to be sustained over time, to build up the confidence of parents to participate in strategic planning forums. This requires another worker, so the Network has recently recruited an outreach worker, who will focus on going into local communities to speak to small forums of parents and encourage participation in the Network.

Contact details for Neath Port Talbot Parent Network:

Nicole James
01639 620 771
07913 941 211
info@TheParentNetworkNPT.org.uk

Setting up A Parent Network

Learning from existing Networks suggests that :

- There is no blueprint that will suit every area. It is important to consult with local parents and to ensure that the development is parent led.
- effective parent participation at a strategic level takes time and short-term funding is not helpful in making long-tern plans.
- it's important to build on what is already there - there is knowledge and experience about parent involvement in local agencies and there are often creative ideas about participation within the youth sector.
- it may be useful to have a host agency initially, but in the longer term independence helps parents to be objective in making strategic decisions.
- there needs to be clarity of role for the Network - there can be difficulties if workers are expected to be direct service providers as well as developing the Network and building the capacity of Network members.
- there is a need for continuous recruitment of parents because parents' circumstances change and they move on and parents who are on strategic groups for a long time may lose their "lay" perspective.
- Word of mouth can be very effective in broadening membership - asking people to bring along a friend or acquaintance can be a particularly useful way to engage people who do not use parenting services.
- Parents need preparation and support to be effective members of Partnerships - the Network can serve that function.
- Diversity is essential, but takes effort to achieve.
- It is important to establishing good links between the Networks, Children's Information Services and other parents' groups and forums within the Local Authority area. This can help with diversity and with gathering a range of views.

It could be achieved through representatives attending each other's meetings, or sharing of newsletters/ minutes of meetings, and /or one-off events on particular topics.

- See also the discussion in Section 2 of this guidance on preparing for parent participation.

Section 5 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Groups needing additional support to participate

All parents are different from each other. It is not possible to cover the whole range of difference in this guide. It has already been made clear that the guide applies to step-parents, foster carers, adoptive parents and anyone else who is bringing up children.

However there are some groups of parents who need additional support to participate. Examples include: parents living in poverty; parents whose children are being looked after by Local Authorities; parents or their children who are experiencing long term illness, mental health problems or substance misuse; parents who are suffering domestic abuse or who are living in refuges; the list is very long. Making sure that all these parents have the information they need and a chance to have their views heard, is quite a challenge.

Agencies working with these families have an important role in making sure that both parents' and young people's views are heard by the people who make policy and plan services. Partnerships need to consider how to link in with social workers, health visitors, Youth Offending Services, drug and alcohol teams and voluntary organisations such as Women's Aid, when developing opportunities for parents to contribute to service planning.

Below are some further examples of key groups of parents/carers who may need additional support to participate. The text boxes indicate some useful resources.

Fathers and other male carers

Nearly a third of all childcare in the UK is carried out by men. Involvement of male carers has been shown to be important for children's sociability, academic achievement and in reducing the likelihood of offending behaviour.

It is clearly important to support fathers as well as mothers in their parenting role, but historically, women have been involved in the majority of services, as staff and as service users.

In recent years, more has been done to support men to take more of an active part in their children's lives. Children In Wales hosts a fatherhood development post and some Local Authorities and voluntary organisations employ staff specifically to encourage the involvement of fathers.

In England, the Department for Education and Skills has produced guidance on engaging fathers in their children's education (see text box). Messages include the need for activity rather than too much discussion and the need to be persistent and creative in involving fathers. Professionals should be explicit about wanting the involvement of fathers, not just "parents" because the assumption will be made that "parents" means "mothers".

According to Ivens and Clements, authors of "An Introduction to working with fathers"[10] "men generally do not "do groups" unless they are specifically task orientated, and even then they may be selective about which tasks they feel comfortable with."

Their "Top Ten Tips for Recruiting Dads" include:

- Being clear and honest about what you are offering; stressing the benefits to their children; using language and images that are male friendly and using word-of-mouth to recruit.
- working individually before inviting fathers to a group

Resources for Engaging Fathers

Children In Wales - fatherhood development worker (02920342434)
www.childreninwales.org.uk

Fatherskills - consultancy and training on making services
father-friendlywww.fatherskills.co.uk

Fathers Direct - guide to working with fathers and training courses
www.fathersdirect.com

The DfES has published "Engaging fathers - Involving Parents,
Raising Achievement," www.dfes.gov.uk

Continyou - advice on involving fathers in their children's education
www.continyou.org.uk

Pam.boyd@continyou.org.uk (contact for Wales)

Penpych Superdads

In December 2001, the head teacher at Penpych School, a community school in Rhondda, had concerns that the parents involved in activities at the school were almost exclusively mothers and grandmothers. He talked to the women about the role that fathers played in their children's lives. Mothers said that they would like fathers to be more involved.

An initial meeting of fathers was advertised and held in the rugby club, to make the atmosphere more informal. Two fathers agreed to help set up a fathers' group. Fathers and other male carers met at the school, fortnightly to begin with and then weekly, to get involved in activities with their children.

Initially, staff helped them to develop a programme of activities with the children and the school provided a room and materials free of charge. Building up numbers took time but now there are 29 children and twelve fathers involved and regular events are held. The group has gradually become self- supporting and applies for grants for bigger events such as residential trips.

The fathers have grown in confidence and some take an active role in the school, including membership of the Governing Body. Children have been active in getting their dads to join in. The Head Teacher describes the change in the children as “extraordinary” with benefits for their confidence and academic achievement, family relationships and for the community in general.

Superdads are now joining with 4 other fathers’ groups in RCT to form a federation called MATCH (Men and Their Children). They will organise events but also hope to influence policy through their collective voice.

Chair - Robert Davies Robert.Davies@AE.GE.com

Head teacher, Gareth Todd Jones: penpych_com@rhondda-cynon-taff.gov.uk

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) parents

BME parents are under-represented in services and on decision-making bodies.[11]. Outreach is essential to find out what services are needed by different groups of parents. If consultation always takes place with existing service users, many BME parents will be excluded and services will not change to accommodate their needs.

In urban areas, there may be a number of BME projects or groups which can help to make contact with parents. It is commonly assumed that “race is not an issue” in rural areas, but in reality, BME families in rural areas may suffer additional problems because of their isolation and lack of public understanding of diversity.

Language and culture differences can make consultations a challenge (for example, having a number of different interpreters in a group). While it is important to find ways of involving BME parents which are appropriate to different cultures, lack of confidence should not deter professionals from taking the initiative. Even in rural areas, there may be a support group of some kind, such as a women's group or faith group, which can be a useful start. Universal services like health visiting, can be used to inform parents what is available and invite them to participate.

Mewn Cymru is an umbrella body which provides a platform for the views of minority ethnic women in Wales. There are development workers in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and North Wales, with links to BME women's groups. Their website lists a number of BME organisations in Wales.
The Black Voluntary Sector Network and local Race Equality Councils may also be able to help with contacts.

The Welsh Assembly Government set up a working group to develop a communications toolkit for Ethnic Minority Communities. This is currently out for consultation but will be launched in 2006.

The toolkit, which will be web-based, contains:

Census data for national and local areas, communication guidance, case studies and additional information resources.

Mewn Cymru has several publications which give recommendations and examples of good practice. www.mewn-cymru.org.uk

Race Equality Guidelines for Communities First partnerships will be published by the Welsh Assembly Government during 2006. The Black Voluntary Sector network has carried out extensive consultation across Wales to inform the guidance. Many of the messages will be useful for Children & Young People's Partnerships.

Involving other marginalised groups such as gypsy/traveller families and asylum seekers also requires sensitivity to culture and/or language issues. For example, some groups will have an oral tradition rather than a written tradition. Again, it may be helpful to use existing agencies, groups or key individuals to make contact. Local Authorities with large gypsy/traveller populations tend to have liaison workers within the LEA. Voluntary and statutory organisations involved in family support may also have links.

Parents of disabled children and children with additional needs

Parents of disabled children or children with additional (special) needs have to seek information and deal with a whole range of professionals from the time their child is diagnosed. They may have to fight for services or for the school place they want for their child.

Parenting a disabled child brings lots of extra challenges. For these reasons, many of the Parent Forums which exist in Wales are for parents of disabled children with or children with additional educational needs.

Some organisations have a specific advocacy role, for example, SNAP Cymru, which provides a Parent Partnership Service across 20 of the 22 LEA's in Wales.

Parents of children with additional learning needs can access impartial information, advice and advocacy through SNAP. The organisation also aims to give families a voice in policy and planning.
www.snapcymru.org

The Welsh Assembly Government has published "The Handbook of Good Practice for Children With Special Educational needs - Working in Partnership With Parents" as part of the SEN handbook for schools.

All LEA's have to have a disagreement resolution service for matters relating to educational placements. These services are run by either NCH Cymru (0800 3896037) or by SNAP.

Parents can develop strengths through advocating for their children, which can help to make them effective members of strategic groups. They have experiences which make them want to improve services, for their own children and for others and they are aware of the challenges to families.

Parents of disabled children are included in relevant subgroups of several Partnerships. A very small number are included on Children's Partnerships, Young People's Partnerships and Framework Partnerships.

Organisations which support parents of disabled children can be approached to provide representation on Partnerships. Contact a Family has recently conducted a survey of 77 parents, about half of whom said they had had an opportunity to comment on services. In the main, this was a one-off consultation. Few parents said that they had a regular opportunity to contribute to service planning, but the majority felt that this was important and would like more involvement. (Survey to be published later in 2006)

Contact a Family has two projects in Wales to involve parents at a strategic level:

Parents Voice (lottery funded) - a project to formalise parent involvement in consultations,. Currently, around 70 parents respond to consultations and contribute to campaigns. Workshops and training days are held on issues which parents feel are important.

Parents and Paediatricians Together - a project to increase parents' influence on the way health services are provided for disabled children.

Contact Details 02920 498001
wales@cafamily.org.uk

Disabled parents

Sixty-eight per cent of households with children where both parents are out of work have at least one disabled parent. Thirty-two per cent of lone parents out of work are disabled (SCIE). Disabled people in work are likely to be paid less than non-disabled people. Therefore, there are very strong links between disability and child poverty.

Disabled parents may find participation difficult if communication or access needs are not met. They may not know about Parent Forums or be able to attend without the right support. Steps need to be taken to ensure that disabled parents know what services area available and also to support their involvement in Parent Forums and consultations. Contact could be made through Health Visitors, Young Carers projects, GP surgeries etc.

Disability Wales is a useful source of information about local groups of and for disabled people. They are setting up three regional networks for disability organisations to work together on issues and campaigns.

There are also several organisations which can provide information about communication and access for people with specific impairments (Appendix 2).

Summaries of the key research messages about supporting and enabling parents with a physical or sensory impairment or parents with learning difficulties can be found on the Social Care Institute for Excellence website www.scie.org.uk (under “resources and publications”).

The Disabled Parents Network provides up to date information for disabled parents through its website. It also gives disabled people a chance to have their say. The website has an “involvement request” page, through which researchers and policy-makers can make contact with disabled parents to ask their views on different issues. There is a fee for this service. www.disabledparentsnetwork.org.uk

Lone parents

Lone parents face additional problems in bringing up their families, such as lower incomes and childcare issues. Many services funded through the Partnerships will have lone parents as service users. It is important that their views are taken into account when policies and plans are developed. Organisations set up by and for lone parents can help to give lone parents a voice in policy and planning.

Gingerbread supports the setting up of self-help parent-led groups for lone parents. There are six hundred members in Wales and one paid worker. She supports the self-help groups and individual members and provides information. Gingerbread also has a dedicated advice line and can signpost services. Gingerbread members are happy to respond to consultations and can be contacted via the main office. (Gingerbread Wales 02920471900 - E-mail: bobby@gingerbread.org.uk)

SPAN (Single Parent Action Network) aims to “give a voice to one-parent families” and to work with decision-makers to improve policies which affect lone parents. SPAN is being funded by the Big Lottery to run five projects across the UK, to build the capacity of lone parents to get involved in trying to influence policy at every level. One of the projects is in Swansea.

SPAN also involved lone parents in anti-poverty work, at a local, national and European level.

Contact details. Tel 011 7 951 431
info@spanuk.org.uk
www.spanuk.org

Grandparents and other older family members

A recent report by the Beth Johnson Foundation[12] highlights the practical, emotional and financial support which grandparents give to their children and grandchildren. Key facts from the document are summarised here.

Around 60% of grandparents look after a grandchild under 15 in the daytime and over half baby sit their grandchildren.

Grandparents are particularly important at times of crisis and family break up. In some families, there might be other older family members providing this kind of support.

Family breakdown is associated both with the highest levels of grandparental help and with high rates of dissatisfaction on the part of the grandparents themselves regarding their role. About 1% of grandparents (approx. 100,000) in Britain have at least one dependent grandchild (aged under 13) living in their household without a parent present.

Reasons for caring for grandchildren include:

- Parents' inability to care due to physical and sexual abuse, neglect, abuse by mother’s partner and domestic violence (24%).
- Parents having deserted children, predominantly due to substance abuse but also just walking out or leaving for a new relationship (23%).
- Family breakdown, including cases where children had not got on with a parent’s new partner (16%).
- Parental illness, including mental health problems (13%).
- Death of parent in which case the grandparent had stepped in as de facto guardian (12%).

Grandparents take on the caring role to avoid their grandchildren being taken into the care of the Local Authority, but the costs to them, financial and emotional, are very high.

Grandparents should be included in the category of “parents” for the purposes of this guidance. The Parenting Action Plan Working Group is currently looking at what other measures may be needed to support grandparents.

Family Rights Group manage an electronic discussion board for grandparents. This is funded by the UK Government and is a useful source of information on issues facing grandparents, such as lack of financial help for grandparents who take on the care of their grandchildren.

Grandparents value the contact with each other, as they can feel isolated.
www.frg.org

Parents of Looked After Children

The Framework for the Assessment of Children In Need and their Families (Welsh Assembly Government 2001) gives advice on developing a partnership approach to working with parents, which can be particularly challenging when there are concerns about a child's welfare.

“The Challenge of Partnership in Child Protection” (DoH 1995) warns of the likelihood of drifting away from a participative approach when there are allegations of abuse. This document gives detailed practice guidance, to ensure a sensitive approach to parents in difficult situations.

Parents of children who are Looked After may experience grief and anger and may not wish to work co-operatively with statutory agencies. However, they still need support and opportunities to make their views known. Maintaining the link is important for children and young people as well as for parents.

Parents in conflict with a local authority may respond to support from a non statutory agency, such as a group for parents of Looked After children. They will have valuable experience to contribute to reviews of services and service development plans.

The Policy Context in Wales

Children and young people's participation

The Welsh Assembly Government has prioritised participation of children and young people. Initiatives include:

- A Children's Commissioner for Wales, as an independent champion for children and young people. The Commissioner involves children and young people in all aspects of his work, including setting the priorities for the work of his office.
- Funky Dragon, the Children and Young People's Assembly.
- School councils in every school and Youth Forums in each local authority area.
- A Participation Unit - a joint initiative, hosted by Save the Children, to support good practice in young people's participation
- A Participation Project within the Assembly Government, looking at how the Assembly Government promotes children and people's involvement in its own work, including policy development and implementation.
- The Children First Programme (1999 - present) which aims to transform management and delivery of social services for children in need and their families. The programme includes a specific objective to "actively involve users and carers in the planning, implementation and review of services."
- National minimum standards for advocacy (2002) to help children and young people make their views known and regulations (2004) to allow all children in need in social care settings a statutory right to advocacy services.
- Changes under the Children Act 2004 requiring Local Authorities to ascertain and give consideration to the wishes and feelings of children in need in relation to the provision of all services.

Legal and policy drivers for parent participation

The right of parents to receive support, and their status as the people with primary responsibility for decisions relating to their children, is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 13. The Assembly Government has adopted the UN Convention as the basis of its work with children and young people.

Since The Children Act (1989) aimed to foster a partnership approach in child protection and child welfare, there has been a host of legislation in health and social care promoting user/carer involvement in services. Examples include: the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act; the Health and Social Care Act 2001; The Framework for the Assessment of Children in

Need and Their Families (National Assembly for Wales 2001); The Carers and Disabled Children Act 2002; the SEN Code of Practice for Wales 2002. Public and patient involvement is a key element of "Improving Health in Wales - a Plan for the NHS and its partners" (2001) and guidance has been produced.[14]

The Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for improving public services, **Making the Connections** (2005)[15] aims to put the citizens at the centre and to promote services "that encourage and enable them to participate in the design and planning of local services". It says that the Assembly Government will **"encourage service delivery bodies to ensure that the user voice is heard at the highest decision-making levels"**.

In support of "Making the Connections", the Assembly Government will be producing guidance for public services, setting out what opportunities should be made available for service users to get involved in the design, management and delivery of services. There will also be guidance on how public services should go about delivering better customer service and public engagement.

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (2006)[16] sets standards which include regular opportunities for service users to be involved in planning and reviewing their own services. Standard 2:1 says that agencies must "implement a policy for the participation of children, young people and their families as partners in planning and evaluation of the services that affect them".

The Children First Programme[17] also requires Local Authorities to "demonstrate that views of children and families are actively sought and used in the planning, implementation and review of services." Children First Management Action Plans and progress reports have to be provided by Local Authorities every year to show how they are involving children and families and how they are acting on their views.

In education, the Welsh Assembly Government has provided funding for Community Focused Schools[18] to be developed. Many community-focused schools will be looking for a range of ways to support and engage with parents, families and the wider community.

The new National Occupational Standards for Work With Parents[19] are based on principles of partnership with parents and empowerment of parents.

The Assembly Government's commitment to the development of integrated centres across Wales, in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund, is bringing together many services for parents and children, including Sure Start, early years education, childcare, play, family support, learning opportunities and health services. The Cymorth guidance encourages activities such as parenting support within these centres or integrated networks of services, providing the ideal opportunity for engagement with parents.

Methods of Consultation

The most common method used in consultation is questionnaire- based surveys and telephone surveys. These need to be skilfully designed, so that they don't prevent people saying that they want to say. They can be improved by involving service users in piloting them.

If questionnaires are sent out, poor returns can bias the findings. Consider collecting completed forms or using incentives to encourage a good number of returns for example, having a prize draw for everyone who sends one back.

Online surveys are quick and inexpensive and can reach large numbers of parents. However, they may not reach some of the most disadvantaged groups.

Questionnaire information is limited by the format so it may be useful to supplement information by using **focus groups** or by setting up theme-based **working groups**.

For involving people in the early stages of developing a policy or strategy, for example, in developing a family support strategy, Open Space technology is a creative and lively method. It enables large groups of people to give their opinions and ideas.

Although Open-Space events have a theme, workshops are not pre-set. They are negotiated by the people attending the event. A time and a room is set aside for each agreed topic and anyone can join any workshop. This approach ensures that the agenda is set by participants, not by the organiser. It needs a confident leader to ensure that the process runs smoothly, but the leader is not imposing her or his ideas.

Participation Cymru can offer training in Open Space technology.

Some partnerships have found imaginative ways of consulting large numbers of parents, such as family **fundays** with an opportunity to comment on a policy. For example, Newport Family Activity day included a chance to comment on the draft Family Support Strategy. The disadvantage is the time and cost involved.

Methods of Evaluating Services with Parents

Satisfaction questionnaires are the most commonly used method of user feedback, but it may be difficult for some parents to express dissatisfaction unless questions are worded to give permission - for example, instead of whether people are satisfied with service x, ask "How could x be done better?"

Issues of literacy and language need to be considered. There are useful visual symbols for satisfaction questionnaires (smiley faces, etc) and reviews with groups of parents can include exercises where people are invited to rate particular services or ideas by putting stars next to their favourites on a chart.

Using volunteers to carry out questionnaire-based interviews may produce more open information than sending out questionnaires or using staff to interview service users.

Standardised before-and-after questionnaires (for example, the Strengths and Difficulties. Questionnaire and Parenting Daily Hassles scale) can provide useful information about what parents think has changed for them and their children as a result of using the service. Children and young people's views should also be sought.

Other ways of seeking feedback are focus groups/workshops, comments and suggestions boxes, graffiti walls, video diaries. Photographic diaries can be used, for example, for parents to follow their children's development.

In groups and workshops, it can be less threatening and more fun to use group exercises and games, rather than just having a discussion. Some resources for exercises are in the textbox below.

Group exercises and games for young people can be adapted for adults to bring some fun into consultations and evaluations.

Spice It up – Dynamix and Save the Children 2002

Gamesters handbook 1 – 1979)

Gamesters Handbook 2 - 1990) Donna Brandes and Howard Phillips (Published by Nelson Thornes)

Gamesters handbook 3 - 1998)

Summary of opportunities for parents to participate

Opportunities for parents to be involved at a service level

Information

- being given clear written and verbal **information about services** and **about children's needs and parenting** in suitable formats
- being told how to make comments or complaints about the service, how to **challenge decisions** and who can help
- being asked **what information they need**
- helping to make information **user-friendly**

Consultation

- having **choices** about the services they use
- **giving feedback** on services they receive, so that improvements can be made
- contributing to **Inspections, Joint reviews** etc
- contributing to **research**

Deciding and Acting Together

- **recruiting** staff, including drawing up job descriptions, involvement in selection processes and induction
- **making decisions together** about new developments and **helping to make them happen**, for example: producing information and educational materials, co-running activities for children or for other parents;
- **involvement in staff training,** in their own service or elsewhere
- sitting on **Parent Panels, Parent Committees, Management Committees**

Supporting Independent Community Action

- parents being supported and funded to **run their own services**

Opportunities for parents to be involved at a strategic level

Information

- being asked what information parents in the area need
- having information about services and support groups available locally, new developments being considered
- being asked what their needs and their children's needs are, to inform strategies and plans (children should also be asked)
- being involved in evaluating existing services/plans

Deciding and Acting Together

- being represented on working groups developing strategies and plans for example, family support strategies, parenting strategies, childcare or play strategies
- being represented on strategic partnerships
- being on steering groups designing new services

Supporting Independent Action

- Parent Forums or Parent Networks can be funded

Additional useful contacts

Contacting BME parents

For a list of over 30 BME women's groups and organisations across Wales, see Mewn Cymru website www.mewn-cymru.org.uk

Commission for Racial Equality
www.cre.gov.uk
02920729200

Race Equality Councils:
Valleys Race Equality Council, Pontypridd
www.valrec.org
01443 401555

South Wales Race Equality Council, Newport
www.swrec.org.uk
01633 259 006

North Wales Race Equality Network Colwyn Bay
info@nwren.org
01492 53585

Race Equality First, Cardiff
www.racequalityfirst.org
mail@racequalityfirst.org

Black Voluntary Sector Network
www.bvsnw.org.uk
bvsnwales@aol.com
02920450068

All Wales Ethnic Minority Association
www.awema.org.uk
enquiries@awema.org.uk
02920664213

Refugees

Welsh Refugee Council
02920 489800

Asylum Seekers

For information about who to contact to involve asylum-seeking families:
Welsh Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers - 01633 855095

Disabled Parents and Parents of Children with Physical, Sensory or Learning Impairments

Contact a Family Wales

Information on over 1000 conditions affecting children and their UK and local support groups
02920 498001
wales@cafamily.org.uk
www.cafamily.org.uk

RNIB Cymru (visual impairment)
02920 450440
nicola.crews@rnib.org.uk
www.rnib.org.uk

SCOPE Cwmpas Cymru (cerebral palsy)
02920 461703
mail@scopecymru.org.uk
www.scope.org.uk

The Down's Syndrome Association
02920 522511
dsa.wales@lineone.net
www.downs-syndrome.org.uk

The National Autistic Society
01792 815915 (NB: number changing soon as Office is moving to Cardiff)
wales@nas.org.uk
www.nascymru.autism.org.uk

Disability Wales
www.disabilitywales.org
info@dwac.demon.co.uk

RNID Cymru (Hearing Impairment)
www.rnid.org.uk
informationline@rnid.org.uk
0808 808 0123

SNAP Cymru (advice and advocacy on Special Needs Education)
Head office 02920384868
headoffice@snapcymru.org
www.snapcymru.org

ABCD (BME children and young people with disability and/or chronic illness)
02920 250055
www.abcdcymru.org.uk

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16. Welsh Assembly Government 2005 National Service Framework for Children, Young people and Maternity Services in Wales
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Further copies

Further copies of this document are available from:

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