

Summary of Themes raised by the Fermanagh Parents Reference Group



The Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) aims to improve the lives of all children living in Northern Ireland. Parenting NI was asked to enable parents to participate in this process. Five area based parents reference groups have been established along with one regional group for BME parents.

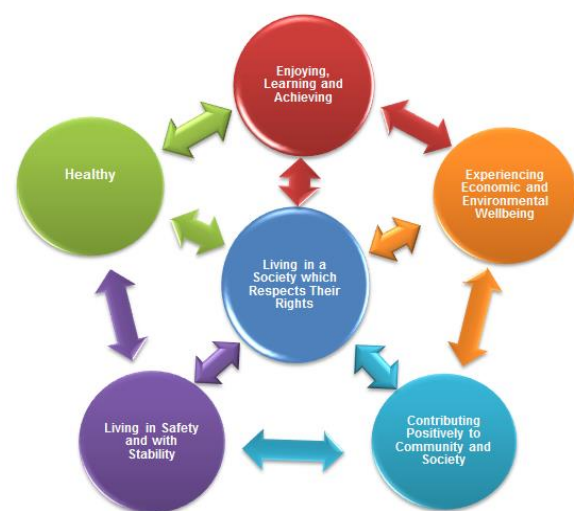
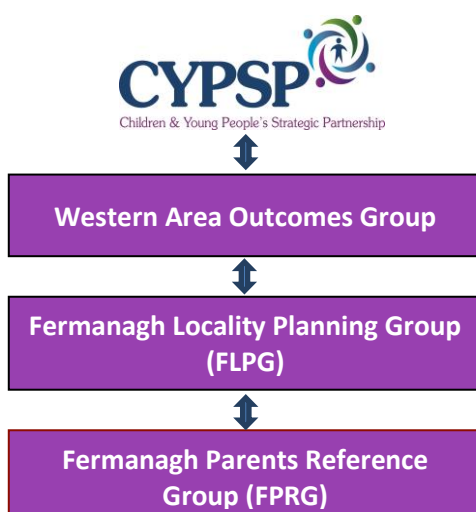
The Fermanagh Locality Planning Group (FLPG) is an umbrella group of a wide range of agencies working for families in Fermanagh. It is tasked to work together to improve outcomes for children in Fermanagh & is part of the CYPSP framework.

A pilot has been set up in Fermanagh in order to explore & enable a group of local parents to become involved in the work of the Fermanagh Locality Planning Group. This group of parents is called the Fermanagh Parents Reference Group (FPRG).

The FPRG currently consists of 24 parents from across the Fermanagh District Council Area. Parents are from a range of backgrounds with children of all ages from babies to adult children including children with disabilities. Most parents in the group live in rural or suburban areas.

The FPRG has met 5 times since it was set up in March 2014. At the initial meeting parents met the FLPG Co-ordinator & identified motivations for joining FPRG; at the 2nd meeting, parents discussed key concerns with the FLPG Co-Chair; at the 3rd meeting, two FLPG representatives met & worked with parents to identify better outcomes for children in Fermanagh. Some members of the FPRG subsequently attended a Village Stakeholder event organised by Fermanagh District Council. At the 4th meeting, parents shared views on how Early Intervention Services could help meet the needs of families in Fermanagh. The most recent meeting provided an opportunity to prepare materials for discussion with the FLPG.

This summary provides an overview of the key themes raised by the FPRG across all meetings to date, using the framework of the following six agreed outcomes for improving children's lives.



Fermanagh in Context

Located in the South West of Northern Ireland, Fermanagh covers an area of 187,582 hectares which accounts for 13.2% of land mass of Northern Ireland. Almost a third (30%) of Fermanagh consists of lakes & waterways. Approximately 61,805 people live in Fermanagh and one quarter are under 17 years old. Average weekly earnings in Fermanagh (£334pw) is almost £100 less than the NI average. Unemployment rate at 4.5% is similar to NI average. (Source: Fermanagh District Council website 2014).



Photo credit: Francescopratese, www.flickr.com



Key Statistics about Children and Young People in Fermanagh

- **Births:** around 867 per annum
- **% Mums Smoking During Pregnancy:** 11% compared to 16% in NI
- **Low Birth Weight Rates:** 5.8% of new born babies weighed less than 2500gms
- **Infant Mortality:** 3.5 per 1000 children died in their first year of life
- **Mothers Breastfeeding leaving hospital:** 47.8% compared to 43.5% in NI
- **Immunisation Rates for MMR at 24 months:** 95.4% compared to 93.7% in NI
- **Births to Teenage Mothers:** 4.7 per 1000 girls aged 13-19 yrs had babies compared to 13.7 per 1000 girls in NI
- **% Dental Registrations Children Aged 0-2yrs:** 35.1% compared to 30.6% in NI (2012)
- **Obesity & Children who are Overweight:** 18% of P1s are overweight; 5.4% are obese (Western Trust area 2010/11)
- **Children with a Disability (in receipt of DLA):** 39.2 per 1000 children same as NI average
- **% of Children with a Statement of Special Education Need in Fermanagh:** higher than NI average for past few years. Currently stands at 3.1% of primary school children & 4.9% of post primary pupils
- **0-17 year olds Admitted to HSC Hospitals with Self-Harm Related Diagnoses:** 4.6 per 10,000 young people up to 17 years compared to NI average of 7.9
- **0-17 year olds Admitted to HSC Hospitals with Alcohol Related Diagnoses:** 4 per 10,000 compared to NI figure of 5.9
- **% of Young People gaining 5 GCSE's (A*-C) or above:** 78.8% in Fermanagh compared to 76.5% in NI (2011/12)
- **Rate/1000 of Children & YP Aged 0-17 who are Victims of Domestic Violence** varies annually & is currently 3.4 in Fermanagh compared to 2.9 in NI (2012/13)

(Source: CYPSP Outcome Monitoring Report November 2013)

Six Key Themes raised by the Fermanagh Parents Reference Group

Parents described many positive aspects about living in Fermanagh & were generally happy to bring their children up here. Six overall key themes were raised in discussions to date - these are presented below in relation to the relevant outcomes for children and young people.

Key Themes raised by Parents	Associated Outcome for Children & Young People
Theme #1 Need to address underfunding of general infrastructure in Fermanagh	
Theme #2 Recognise isolation & loneliness experienced by many parents and enable better access to social or community support	
Theme #3: More professional & practical support with new baby	
Theme #4 Need proactive support for families with children with disabilities	
Theme #5 Need more activities/facilities for children & young people including cross community opportunities	
Theme #5 Enable active involvement of parents in development of services for families in Fermanagh	

Theme #1 Need to address underfunding of general infrastructure in Fermanagh



Photo credit: Rita O'Loughlin, Fermanagh Parents Reference Group

Many parents referred to the natural beauty & resources of Fermanagh but identified that there was serious underfunding of services.

Some parents said that lack of investment in essential core services for families has resulted in too much pressure on community & voluntary groups who are trying to fill the gaps caused by inconsistent statutory provision.

Parents described how some rural areas which had previously received funding to build infrastructure, have now run out of funds. Many communities are left with empty buildings & no replacement services. Parents expressed a lot of anger about “white elephants sitting along border areas” & how money was invested “in buildings not services”.

In some areas, parents who previously had access to child care, no longer have these options & this impacts particularly on mothers who want to return to work or need some brief respite or simply want to be in contact with other parents who are at the same stage of parenting.

One parent described a stone seat in the middle of her village, which appears to her to be “the sole legacy of all the various short term funding strategies” which have since dried up - resulting in closure of child care & other community facilities.

Parents identified that difficulties in community infrastructure included poor access to transport & broadband in some areas which further emphasised the isolation experienced by rural families. Parents described the negative knock on effect that school closures have had on children & the wider community in rural areas. While there had been consultations on matters such as school closures, parents felt that decisions were made which did not reflect the views of the community. This type of experience led parents to believe that such consultations are pointless, “as they were already done deals”.

One parent suggested that the image of the islands of Fermanagh reflects how many communities feel – “that services seem to be out of reach even at the centre”. While aware of the current lack of resources, parents felt that more could be done with better planning, collaboration and community engagement.

Associated Outcome for Children & Young People:



Theme #2 Recognise isolation & loneliness experienced by many parents and enable better access to social or community support



Photo credit: Owen Gormley, SWC Fermanagh

Parents in this group have children ranging in age from a few months old to adult children over 25 years old. While all parents discussed the joys & challenges of bringing up children, many agreed that it was “tough bringing up kids in a rural area without support”.

Parents identified a need for more recognition that parents are primary carers and that sometimes they may need help with temporary or long term issues that can affect any family.

Some parents described a range of helpful support services such as Sure Start, Lifestart & Home-Start, parent & toddler groups or parenting programmes including those provided by Parenting NI.

However many of these services are not universally available to all families across Fermanagh & indeed services like Sure Start are currently only available to parents of pre-school children in certain postcode areas.

A number of parents in the Group were not aware of what community based family support services existed & expressed frustration about this.

Parents described this lack of support as “you feel as if you are very much on your own” while another said “it’s just me and the four walls at home”. Other parents agreed saying “unless you are in crisis, you do not get the support you need”.

Very few parents had heard of the Family Support website which lists support services available across Northern Ireland. However, according to a number of parents, many services listed for Fermanagh were not actually available in Fermanagh. This was confirmed by one parent who was also a service provider who said “in many cases, there is nowhere for counsellors to refer people on to” while another parent described “far too much signposting, without anyone to actually help”. The Group heard of one parent who went looking for help and had to tell her story to 23 different agencies before she finally got some limited support.

Many parents said they would like to see better support services in Fermanagh including more opportunities to meet other parents in similar circumstances.

Associated Outcome for Children & Young People:



Theme #3: More professional & practical support with new baby



Photo credit: <http://shesaid.com/au/understanding-women-postnatal-depression/>

Overall, parents were appreciative of the services which helped them look after their health. Most parents had a good relationship with their health care providers, however some parents expressed frustration about trying to get a GP appointment at times that suited the family, with one parent saying “you would nearly need to know 2 weeks in advance that you were going to be sick”.

Mothers said that most midwives were great & very helpful however women did not see the same midwives throughout pregnancy – they said they would have liked to build up relationship/trust with one or two midwives during their pregnancy & birth.

Some parents suggested the need for more services to help with birth preparation such as hypno-birthing. Parents asked why these courses are only offered during the day (9am – 5pm) instead of out of work hours which would enable more partners to attend & learn how to be more fully involved & supportive in the birth?

Some parents said that there was lack of consistency in information given by maternity staff & that health care professionals sometimes contradicted each other or did not appear to have the most up to date information.

Many women said they did not read the leaflets given out by the health services & felt overwhelmed by this type of information. Online sources seemed more helpful as “you can look up what you need to know”. Many new parents used pregnancy Apps or websites during pregnancy, however some parents who had looked at the Western Trust Maternity Services Page said “there was very little useful stuff on this page”.

Some parents described how Health Visitors (HV) can provide good emotional support – especially by coming out to the house. One parent talked about how she was able to develop a good relationship with her HV which was important to her in looking after herself & her baby. However another parent described how the HCP was not able to pick up on how she really felt (when baby was around 8 months): “She only asked “how’s your mood?” and did not ask the schedule of questions. She seemed to make an assumption that I was coping, so it was difficult to respond honestly”. This mum’s mental health concerns were noticed by her sister who encouraged her to seek help.

Parents reflected that it would be useful for mothers-to-be to be given more preparation about birth, breastfeeding & possible post natal depression. One mother asked “why do health staff hide this information from parents when it is inevitable that some parents will suffer from post natal depression & not know that it is normal?”

Associated Outcome for Children & Young People:



Theme #4 Need proactive support for families with children with disabilities



Photo credit: "Hope and Possibility" Achilles International, www.flickr.com

A number of parents in the group have children with a disability & some parents have also been involved in trying to improve services & facilities for other families who have a child with a disability.

Other members of the group expressed appreciation for the ongoing campaigning efforts of these parents, & expressed willingness to listen to the issues & to learn from their experiences about what works to improve situations for families.

There were many similarities in parents' experiences from initially finding out that their child had a disability, trying to get a diagnosis & then trying to get help. Parents described poor & fragmented services for families with children with a disability which "just adds to the stress of the whole family unit".

Some parents said they felt that they were fighting a battle most of the time as "you are not told what you are entitled to, you have to find out for yourself" & "it constantly feels like you are treading water dealing with Council, Housing, [the Trust] & all the others who are supposed to be helping". Some parents were also aware of better services in other areas in Northern Ireland.

One parent who has been struggling to get help for her son said "sometimes when I hear about things going on in other areas [for children with a disability] I want to weep about the lack of services in Fermanagh".

Parents described particular bottlenecks in services for children with a disability including assessments by the Trust which appear to be based on available services rather than needs of the child/family; an informal register which apparently exists in the Trust which parents regard as being about gatekeeping rather than a true reflection of the numbers & needs of children with disabilities; apparent reluctance in some cases of Education & Library Board to undertake assessments or to follow up with services identified in Statements of Educational Need; lack of provision for children & young people during holiday periods; non-existent or variable quality carer & respite services; big gaps in services for children in transition to Adult Services. Given the ongoing problems with services for disabled people in Fermanagh, parents also expressed concern about who will take care of their adult disabled children when they die.

Parents would like more clarity about how the whole system works for children with a disability & their families. They would like to see key workers put in place to help families navigate the system & they would like more choices & parental control about issues such as family support & respite care.

Associated Outcome for Children & Young People:



Theme #5 Need more activities/facilities for children & young people including cross community opportunities



Photo credit: "Loitering hoodies" Purplemattfish, www.flickr.com

There was a lot of positive feedback about the good work that goes on in educating children & young people in many schools across Fermanagh.

Parents described how some schools have made particular efforts to involve parents in the education of their children & this was much appreciated. A number of parents in the group are also involved in a programme called Families & Schools Together (FAST) which was set up by Save the Children. Other parents expressed interest in this programme particularly as it appears to provide opportunities for parents to continue to meet up & pursue issues of interest.

The natural environment in Fermanagh was also something that many parents referred to in relation to their children being able to play freely as well as families being able to make use of the beautiful waterways & lakes.

However there was a general consensus of the need for more opportunities for children to play &

more street based activities particularly for those families who live in towns.

The need for activities for young people was also highlighted & for many families this was also linked to the need for better transport options. Parents thought that it would be important to ask young people themselves about what types of activities they would like to see in their communities.

Parents identified that the 9 weeks of the summer is a long time for many families who may not have access to child care & are living in areas where there does not appear to be a lot of activities for families.

Parents would like to see more family based activities including more cross community activities.

Some parents lamented the fact that there may be events/activities happening but that they often do not hear about them until after the event. Many parents agreed that it would be useful to receive more information about what is going on for families across Fermanagh.

Parents would be particularly interested in hearing about free or low cost activities for all age groups.

Associated Outcome for Children & Young People:



Theme #6 Enable active involvement of parents in development of services for families in Fermanagh



Photo credit: CYPSP

The Fermanagh Parents Reference Group was set up as a pilot in March 2014 with a view to enabling parents to become actively involved in the CYPSP process to improve lives of children in Northern Ireland. The Group is facilitated by Parenting NI. Parents have met a number of times and also communicate between meetings via email and text messages. Meetings have been fairly informal and have been held in various locations around Fermanagh which enables parents to see some of the support services that are available to families.

Parental motivations for joining this group included wanting to see improvements for their own family and other families in Fermanagh now and in the future. A number of parents referred to the expression “it takes a village to raise a child” acknowledging the wide range of support that is needed to bring up healthy and happy children. One parent said: “I would like to know that my children have an option to stay here – I want to see better services, better opportunities”.

A number of parents who have been involved in consultations in the past, described these mainly as “tick box exercises, where we got lots of promises but no action”. Many parents described how they have previously looked on in despair as “so many decisions are being made without involvement of parents who know best”.

Parents discussed how important it was to have this opportunity to be involved in this CYPSP process and to share their experiences & views about raising families in Fermanagh. Many parents would like to continue to be involved – some parents described this as a chance for them to contribute something back to their community. Parents also expressed a desire to support each other and to work with decision makers to make progress on key issues for families in Fermanagh.

Parents said that they do not want to just talk about the issues: they want decision makers to listen. One parent said “Parents need to be at the table [with decision makers and service providers] to raise these important issues and to see real action being taken”.

Associated Outcome for Children & Young People:



Views of the Fermanagh Parents Reference Group will be submitted to the Fermanagh Locality Planning Group as part of a wider process to improve lives of all children living in Northern Ireland (www.cypsp.org). The Fermanagh Locality Planning Group consists of all main agencies which provide services for children in Fermanagh and has specific responsibility for improving lives of children in Fermanagh.

Interested in joining or finding out more about the Fermanagh Parents Reference Group?
Please contact Maria Herron at Parenting NI; mariah@parentingni.org or 028 90310891 (14 November 2014)