

# Overall Summary of Themes raised by CYPSP Parent Reference Groups



ParentingNI



## Background

The Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) is a high level collaboration of agencies working for children and families which aims to improve the lives of all children living in Northern Ireland.

Parenting NI were requested to enable parents to participate in the Action Planning process during the period 2012 - 2014. Five area based parent reference groups as well as a Regional Group for Black, Minority Ethnic Parents (BME) were subsequently set up. A Group for Parents with Children with a Disability was also established, and were facilitated directly by the Disability Sub-Group. A pilot of a locality based Parents Reference Group was also developed in Fermanagh.

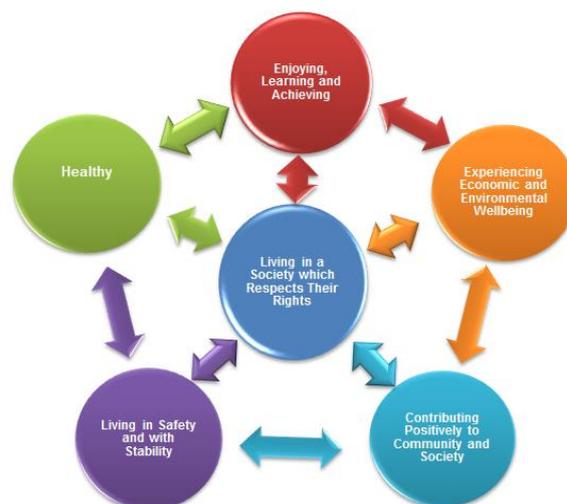
Over 200 parents joined Parent Reference Groups in 2012 – 2014 as outlined in the table below:

Name of Group	Parents
Belfast	29
Fermanagh	27
Northern	22
Regional BME	78
South Eastern	19
Southern	15
Western	45
<b>Total</b>	<b>235</b>

Each of the Parent Reference Groups met on a number of occasions and were invited by the CYPSP to undertake a range of tasks including:

- Identification of issues of concern to families;
- Suggestions as to how children's lives could be improved using the Six Outcomes framework
- Contributions to Area Based Action Plans & the Regional BME Action Plan

It is of note that a number of issues raised by parents were acknowledged & incorporated into some of the CYPSP Action Plans. This summary provides an overview of the key themes raised by the Parent Reference Groups across Northern Ireland, using the framework of the six agreed outcomes for improving children's lives. An individual Summary of Themes is available for each Reference Group.



# PARENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## Number of Parents in NI

**400851**

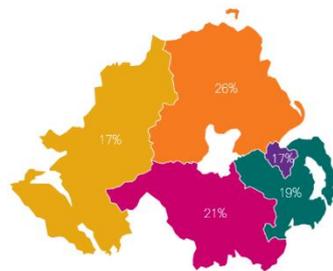
parents with dependent children in Northern Ireland

**31.4%** of the population are parents with dependent children

A dependent child is a person in a household aged 0 to 15 (whether or not in a family) or a person aged 16 to 18 who is a full-time student in a family with parent(s).



Males (42%) Females (58%)

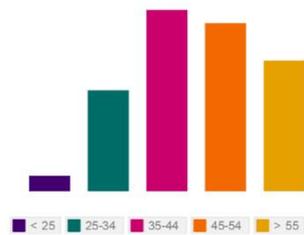


## By Trust Area

Number of parents in each trust area



## Age of Parents in NI



## Family Status



**7,458**

Male Lone Parent



**68,134**

Female Lone Parent



**325,259**

All Couple Families including married/civil partnership/co-habiting

## Urban/Rural Classification



Urban (61%) Rural (39%)



## Total Number of Dependent Children

**543,982**

**6%**

of dependent children have a long term health problem or disability



Data collected from 2011 census, with thanks to NISRA.



## Summary of Themes relating to 'Healthy Outcomes'



Appreciation & compliments were shared about individual practitioners, but overall many concerns were expressed about services or lack of services which parents perceived could have a negative impact on healthy outcomes for children/young people. Gaps were identified regarding:

**Maternity services** – this related to antenatal preparation, birth & post-natal support for new parents. Mothers described meeting many different midwives for short periods of time, & expressed preference for continuity of carer in maternity services which they thought would help develop trust & confidence about giving birth. Parents requested more advice & practical support with infant feeding in both the hospital & community.

Women expressed frustration about the lack of honesty or preparation for the possibility of post-natal depression & would like to see more done to help new mothers.

Many women described feeling abandoned after the birth of their baby. This sense of loneliness was often compounded by isolation particularly in rural areas and by lack of practical support with the demands of looking after a new baby.

Parents were interested in the concept of Infant Mental Health & thought all new parents should be made more aware of their important role at this critical stage of their baby's development.

**Information about sources of support** - with some exceptions, leaflets produced by statutory agencies were highly criticised, & most parents said that they used the internet or apps to seek information relating to health & support needs. Most parents had never heard of the Family Support Website, but thought it was a good idea.

**Access to health care services** – parents in most areas found it difficult to make GP appointments for their families at times which actually suited them. This difficulty appears to relate to the cumbersome booking system which parents regarded as more of a gatekeeping than appointments system.

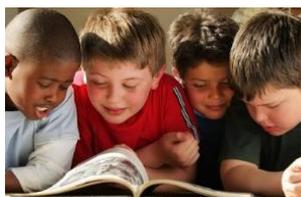
The need for good interpretation services was considered important to ensure that the whole community can access health services effectively. Dental services were criticised for expense for parents & difficulty in registering babies. In some geographical areas, frustration was expressed about waiting times in A&E and for hospital appointments in general.

Some parents whose children had a terminal illness shared their views on the need for a more child/young person focused palliative care system.

**Better access to specific health services** for young people – Parents thought that there was opportunity for more co-operation between mental health advocacy services & the education system in order to reach out and help young people who are struggling. The need for a more responsive & accessible sexual health service was also identified.

Parents expressed **specific concerns about obesity**, and wanted to know more about prevention. There was appreciation for Cook-it programmes & other community efforts that sought to help families in a non-stigmatising way.

## Summary of Themes relating to 'Enjoying, Learning and Achieving'



Parents acknowledged many existing services which contribute to this outcomes including Councils which make extra efforts to ensure good community facilities, and schools which work hard to ensure children that children are happy as well as having good educational outcomes.

A number of suggestions were made in relation to:

The need for non-stigmatising **Parenting Education** from antenatal stages right through to handling teenagers. Dealing with challenging behaviours through positive discipline techniques was regarded as key information that should be available to more parents. Some parents also thought that the importance of playing with your child or reading to your child from an early stage, is valuable information that new parents may not be aware of. More Parenting Education could be delivered via schools or in community venues. Consideration of universal Sure Start services for all families who need/want access to this menu of parenting support

**More proactive Family support services** including EWO to help children who are struggling by taking a more family centred approach to presenting behaviours.

**Help Parents to help their children** at school with more information on school readiness; better communication with parents including those considered "seldom seen, seldom heard"; offer parents opportunities to develop their own skills particularly basic literacy, help with dyslexia and learning English as a second language; develop more parent

forums or parent councils perhaps using existing models such as the FAST model which has been successful in engaging parents in some schools

**Address need for more pre-school places** particularly in rural areas

Some parents expressed concern about apparent **overcrowding in some classes**, where the ratio of children to teachers was higher than recommended.

**More integrated education** to help address the continuing segregation in Northern Ireland

**Ensure schools are welcoming to children from other cultures** including celebration of diversity and promotion of bilingualism

**Introduce more schemes to help children in school** such as the Buddy system, Anti-bullying toolkits, Mental Health awareness and help at transition stages

**Clarity about diagnosis and support for additional needs** – parents described difficulties in securing assessments and subsequent support

**More opportunities for non-academic choices** and more recognition for young people who make these choices

**More after school and summer time activities** for children including PLAY opportunities

**More family orientated activities that are free or low cost**

**Activities for young people** – Parents thought it was important to ask young people themselves what is required and to take transport into consideration particularly in rural areas

## Summary of Themes relating to 'Safety and Stability'



There were many acknowledgements of good communities and helpful agencies such as Home Start, Sure Start, Lifestart and various Church groups which have helped provide many families with a sense of belonging and support. However, many parents outlined concerns within their communities that could undermine a child's sense of safety and stability.

Some parents described living in **areas which had ongoing issues** including the normalisation of violent behaviour; access to street drugs; ongoing paramilitary activities; paedophiles living in housing estates; interface areas; domestic violence; family break up; multiple problems at home; isolation; hidden depression; racism in housing estates, schools and workplaces and perceived non-intervention by other members of the community and statutory bodies including the police.

Need for **easy access to support for short term/long term problems**. Parents appreciated that support delivered via parenting programmes, Sure Starts, mentoring and the Family Support Hubs could all help families to deal with challenges.

Parents specified that there should be a range of options and that services should be personalised to the needs of the family – problems could not be solved by “a one size fits all” approach.

Parents hoped that opening hours would take into account realities for families and that health care professionals should be respectful and non-judgemental. Many parents

expressed frustration about not being able to access Sure Start services which they thought should be available to all families.

Need to **focus on young people** particularly those who could benefit from increased confidence and self-esteem. Having more appropriate facilities and activities might help ensure that young people feel valued. Sports activities in particular were seen as beneficial as well as other methods to help young people participate and de-stress.

Need for more evening and weekend activities to reduce risk of offending and anti-social behaviour. Need for whole family approach to help young people who drop out of school.

Need for more **information on where to get support** particularly in rural areas.

## Summary of Themes relating to 'Economic and Environmental Well-being'



Parents agreed it was important to ensure economic and environmental well-being for children. Some parents described financial struggles and concerns about trying to make ends meet, which was a major source of stress for them. A few parents shared information about sources of support which other parents were not aware of.

Parents highlighted a **need for more proactive help** and improved access to money management guidance particularly for families who are struggling or living in debt.

Parents expressed concern about some families who are on low incomes but excluded from benefits. Parents who themselves were experiencing poverty highlighted the importance of breakfast clubs and subsidised uniforms for their children.

A small number of parents accessed some practical support during recent financial crisis from organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureau and Christians Against Poverty; parents also discussed use of food banks.

Many parents **appreciated where they lived**, and the natural environment, particularly in rural areas was identified as a positive feature. However, there were also stories from parents living in environments which did not appear to be conducive to healthy family living arrangements.

**Poor quality housing in some areas** was identified which included **single glazing, dampness, poor state of repair and vandalism** and this appears to be particularly impacting on BME families. There was also concern expressed about the number of **homeless families** and those living in temporary accommodation. Many families spoke about the lack of green spaces and play facilities for their children.

Unemployment and working in low paid jobs was a reality for some parents who identified the need for more practical solutions such as more job opportunities and training. Parents from the BME communities in particular identified the need to tackle exploitative work conditions including being paid below the minimum wage; discrimination; racism and poor working conditions.

**Child care** was identified as a problem by a number of parents due to costs (eg over £200 a week for one child), limited places or closure – all of which impacted on some parents ability to return to work.

**Poor infrastructure in rural areas** was a particular concern and included **reduced availability of services, transport problems and poor broadband coverage**. Parents also pointed out that some services previously provided in rural areas no longer existed leaving empty buildings and a negative impact on community morale.

## Summary of Themes relating to 'Contributing positively to community and society'



Parents were generally in favour of this concept and thought that opportunities for children and young people as well as **inter-generational volunteering opportunities** could benefit the whole community and contribute to improved relationships.

Parents said there was a need to make volunteering opportunities more **accessible** to young people (possibly via schools) and suggested consideration of a volunteering scheme such as that in Rol for Year 10 students. It would be important to ensure that volunteering opportunities are **meaningful** for young people. Some parents likened the idea of volunteering to the phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” and felt that children could learn from others as well as contribute to their community. Other perceived benefits were to increase employment prospects.

Some people thought volunteering might **help address the isolation** that they currently experience in their community, with **some parents identifying they have no sense of community where they currently live**. For some BME families too, volunteering may provide an opportunity to **address their sense of exclusion** from the indigenous community.

A few parents were already involved in volunteering, and described this as “a way of giving back” to the community. Some parents made practical suggestions for volunteering, such as more experienced mums helping out with new mothers who do not have family nearby. Parents also felt that their involvement and sharing of ideas in this CYPSP process was a way of contributing positively to society.

## Summary of Themes relating to 'Living in a society which respects children's rights'



Parents were **unsure about how Northern Ireland measured up as a society with regard to respecting children's rights**. There is perhaps a need for more information about current status of children's rights here and of future targets? Parents said there was a need for **more accessible information on rights** of children for both children and adults.

There was some **debate among some parents** as to whether children had "too many rights". This was a direct reference to whether or not it was permissible for parents to smack their children. Some parents felt that this was the only way to discipline children, and felt challenged by children's increasing awareness that physical punishment is unacceptable. Alternative positive parenting approaches were also discussed, but it would appear that this is a highly contentious topic.

Parents agreed that all children should have their rights protected whether they were marginalised or not. However it did appear to be the case that children and young people who are more vulnerable may face further discrimination and may not be living in a society which respects their rights. Parents across Northern Ireland highlighted the apparent lack of respect of rights relating to **children who have a disability, children with a mental health issue and some children from some BME communities**.

Many parents of children with disabilities described having to struggle from the beginning with seeking diagnosis and information right through to accessing health, social, welfare, education and housing services for their children. Services were perceived as being fragmented & frustrating for families. Parents would like these services

to be more streamlined and pro-active in helping support families to care for their child with disability.

Families with a child with a mental health condition considered that the services could be more family orientated and less stigmatising.

Racism and discrimination against children from BME communities appeared to be widespread, and ranged from verbal to serious physical attacks. Parents identified that while commitment has been expressed to ensuring that NI becomes a more tolerant and multi-cultural society, this has yet to be proven given continued attacks on individuals including children from BME communities.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

This summary provides an initial overview of the key themes raised by parents across Northern Ireland. These issues are important to parents and contain many suggestions about how services could be more responsive in working with families to ensure better outcomes for children in Northern Ireland.

The CYPSP would like to encourage parents to get involved in the design and development of services. In order to address this and to take into account parents' own preference for meaningful and practical local solutions, a pilot was undertaken in the Fermanagh area involving parents and the Locality Planning Group.

Following on from the success of this pilot, parental participation will now be enabled through Locality Planning Groups and this process will be supported by Parenting NI.

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