Parents Panel: Summary Reports of Meetings Held from January 2009 to March 2010

TNS-BMRB

Department for Education

PARENTS PANEL: SUMMARY REPORTS OF MEETINGS HELD FROM JANUARY 2009 TO MARCH 2010

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

1. BMRB was commissioned by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2008 to organise and facilitate a Parents' Panel, to comprise around 40 parents, reflecting a wide mix of demographic and attitudinal factors. The Panel met quarterly to discuss a range of issues linked to government policy. Ministers and officials from the then DCSF attended each Panel meeting. Between January 2009 and March 2010 the Panel met seven times.

2. The 40 panel members were selected using purposive sampling in order to achieve a balanced sample of parents, reflecting key groups of interest whilst maintaining an inclusive range of variables. The sample was organised according to the following key variables:

- Parents and carers of children in different age bands from 0-19 years;

- Parents from different geographical locations across England, incorporating both rural and urban areas;

- A mix of key demographic characteristics, including:
  - Socio-economic status
  - Age of parent/carer
  - Gender of parent/carer
  - Ethnicity of parent/carer;

- A mix of family unit types, including single parent families, absent parents, step parents and carers;

- Key DCSF customer segments (as developed by BMRB/the Futures Company following the National Survey of Parents and Children)[1];

- Parents of children with Special Educational Needs and disabilities; and

- Mix of school type, including parents with children at community, voluntary aided/controlled and independent schools.

- 3. Throughout the first year of the Parents' Panel respondents were invited to reflect on some of the issues covered during the deliberative events through personal films. Parents were given video cameras and asked to record "video diary" style footage in their local community with the aim of increasing their own and other parents' understanding of issues.

PARENTS' PANEL 1 HELD ON 13 JANUARY 2009

Parents' priorities

At the outset the Panel members' priorities in relation to parenting were explored following a presentation about the government's commitment to support and engage parents as set out in the Children's Plan. Subsequent discussions focused on perceived challenges to parenting; views about support currently available; and priorities for government policy.

- Panel members' unprompted views about the **challenges associated with being a parent** highlighted a key distinction between concerns about their children and more general concerns about the services families depend upon:

  o Parents' concerns about their children included challenges they had experienced, such as difficulty managing children's behaviour, as well as fears about potential problems relating to their children's personal safety, health, happiness and education.

  o Societal pressures were identified as a common factor underpinning these actual and potential challenges to parenting, with parenting roles felt to be undermined by pressures such as family breakdown, media influences, peer pressure, and perceived loss of discipline in schools and supervision on the streets.

  o Parents' concerns about services specifically included a perceived lack of affordable, flexible and high quality childcare; a lack of provision for children with special needs; a perceived loss of health visitors; and inconsistent quality of local schools.

- Views about **areas where parents need most support** were strongly influenced by their views about the services currently available to them. Six key service areas were identified and discussed, highlighting a number of desired improvements, including: more affordable and flexible childcare; greater availability of after-school activities; more consistency and quality in relation to education; greater flexibility when accessing health services; improved access to informal, non-judgemental parenting advice; and earlier access to services for children with special needs.

- Parents' **priorities for government policy** were closely connected to their individual experiences of services and their views about improvements (see point above). However, a number of common concerns and priorities emerged in relation to service provision, specifically focusing on the following: quality and consistency; flexibility and affordability; personalised services; and, services that empower parents.

Parental engagement in children's learning and development

Parents' views about parental engagement in children's learning and development were explored following a presentation outlining the government's vision for 21st Century Schools. Subsequent discussions focused on panel members' understanding of 'partnership' with schools; their experiences of parental engagement; their views about overcoming barriers to parental engagement; and how government can support parental engagement.

- Panel members' **understanding of 'partnership' with schools** varied according to their individual experiences, ranging from parents taking an active interest in their child's learning, to schools providing opportunities for parents to engage. A key distinction emerged around where responsibility for driving partnership was placed – whether this was with parents, schools or a joint responsibility between both parents and schools. Satisfaction with current levels of engagement with schools appeared to broadly define the extent to which parents accepted responsibility for being involved in their child's learning and the extent to which they would hold their school accountable.

- Panel members identified both personal and school-related factors affecting their **experiences of parental engagement**, specifically relating to whether they could easily access the school, and the schools' approachability and communication with parents. Experiences comprised different forms of engagement, including both formal and informal engagement in school management and children's learning. Preferences for engagement varied according to the approachability of the school, the age of the child, parents' working hours and their attitude towards involvement, with flexible opportunities to engage highlighted as particularly important to enable parents to engage in ways that suited their individual preferences and skills.

- A range of **barriers to parental engagement** were identified, including both personal and external barriers.

  o Personal barriers included three broad areas: access issues, such as lack of time and transport issues; capability issues, such as lack of skills and language difficulties; and psychological barriers, such as low confidence and apathy. Suggestions for overcoming these barriers included introducing more flexible contact opportunities with schools; encouraging greater working flexibility for employees; providing course packs, training and support groups for parents in order to build their skills, confidence and interest in engagement; and fostering an interactive relationship between parents and schools from the first contact.

- External barriers to parental engagement included issues relating to schools' approach towards engagement; children's reluctance for parents to get involved; and perceptions of health and safety restrictions limiting scope for engagement. To overcome these barriers, parents suggested clarifying schools' responsibilities in relation to engagement; engaging parents of older children in non class-based activities; and providing greater clarity around regulations associated with parents engaging with schools and other pupils.

- Parents' **suggestions for how government could support parental engagement** broadly related to three areas: clarification of schools' responsibilities for parental engagement; greater accountability of schools in relation to parental engagement; and ring-fenced funding for schools to engage parents.

School Report Cards

Panel members' views about School Report Cards were gathered within a brief survey following the event, during which a presentation was given outlining the government's objectives for introducing a School Report Card. The survey sought to gauge parents' reactions to this presentation and their views about the type of information that should be included within a School Report Card.

- Most respondents sought information on school performance and made use of school visits and Ofsted reports. Just over half of these parents found the information they received helpful.

- All respondents agreed with the principle of having a School Report Card. Of the potential benefits listed, most respondents selected *'provision of relevant and objective information'.* The main concerns were that the information might not be up to date or clear.

- Suggestions for other information parents would like to see in a School Report Card included comparisons to other schools, truancy levels, school stance / results on anti-social behaviour, activities provided out of school hours, and information about provision for children with special needs.

- Almost everyone wanted an overall score or indicator to be provided in the School Report Card. The most popular suggestions for how School Report Cards should be made available were through the school prospectus or website or an official Website.

PARENTS' PANEL 2 HELD ON 31 MARCH 2009

Views about extended services

- **Understanding of 'extended services'** - The phrase 'extended services' was not known to panel members prior to this event. Following a description of the concept of extended services, parents' reactions highlighted a number of issues:

  - Despite being unaware of the phrase, parents were familiar with certain services provided as part of extended services, specifically childcare provision and activities for children.

  - The language of 'extended services' was felt to be unclear, in some cases implying a focus on formal, statutory services.

- **Awareness of services currently available** – As noted above, parents were aware of certain services provided as part of extended services, specifically childcare provision and activities for children. However, parents lacked awareness of other elements of the 'core offer' and this was said to be a result of a lack of provision, lack of direct need, and difficulty linking externally-provided services with the concept of 'extended services in schools'. Parents expected schools to keep them informed of extended services, and blamed poor school management when this did not occur.

- **Experiences of extended services** – Parents' experiences of extended services were underpinned by a number of issues, specifically a perceived lack of consistency between schools, accessibility issues, and mixed quality of provision. Where parents described inadequate or inappropriate services, these were associated with a school's lack of understanding and consultation about the needs of service users.

- **Ideal extended services** - When considering which services parents would ideally like to see accessed through schools, parents prioritised supervised activities for children. Other core offer services were identified as being important but lower priority. In order to address issues of consistency, accessibility and quality, parents specified that schools should be required to understand the needs of service users. Regular consultation was therefore identified as a key requirement.

- **Views of extended services overall** – The principle of extended services was well received by panel members, providing the potential to meet key needs. However, concerns were raised about cost implications and the potential distraction from schools' primary focus of educating children.

Views about supporting children's emotional health and wellbeing

- **Confidence about supporting children's emotional wellbeing** - Parents were generally confident about their ability to support their children's emotional wellbeing. However, a number of factors were found to affect confidence levels, including: a child's age, gender and the cause of their anxiety.

- **Barriers to supporting children -** Panel members identified potential barriers affecting parents' ability to support their children. These included factors affecting child-parent relationships, such as parents' lack of time and ability to discuss children's concerns, and some children's introversion and lack of respect for adults. Further barriers identified by parents included lack of support from external sources, such as family, other parents, and formal support services.

- **Views about support for parents** – Parents' views about support currently available to parents differed according to specific services. Schools were identified as the primary point of contact for issues concerning children's emotional wellbeing, although their ability to provide support was thought to be dependent upon teachers' workload and interest. Negative perceptions about accessibility of specialist health services and expertise of primary healthcare affected parents' views about the appropriateness of healthcare support in relation to children's emotional wellbeing. Similarly, social services was deemed to be either too interventionist or ineffective to provide mainstream support for parents. Experiences of specialist parent support were limited.

How services could better support parents – Suggestions for improvements to support for parents focused on providing a central source of information and advice and greater opportunities for parental networking. Awareness of existing support in these areas was limited and on learning about their availability, parents called for greater publicity and marketing to raise awareness.

Family stability

- **Issues relating to the family unit that can affect stability** included:

  o Time: Work pressures and hectic lifestyles were seen to increasingly impinge on parents' ability to spend quality time together as a family.
  o Money: Financial constraints meant some parents felt they missed out on family activities, which could lead to emotional strain on family relationships.
  o Health: Caring for a poorly family member was seen to divert attention away from other family members, as well as placing financial and emotional pressures on a family.
  o Parenting approach: Clear boundaries for children and consistency between parents were thought to be conducive to family stability.

- **External factors that can affect family stability** included:
  o Support networks: Friends and support groups were seen as becoming increasingly important sources of advice as close extended family networks were perceived to be living further apart.
  o Social pressures: A commercialised society was seen to encourage parents to spend beyond their means. Coupled with the recession, financial worries were regarded as having a significant impact on family relationships.
  o Political pressures: Government initiatives, such as The Children's Act, were thought to undermine parental authority.

- **Services available to support family stability** – While parents generally felt that support was available, they were unsure of specific services or how to access them. Other issues that limited access included limited availability of services; the stigma of asking for help; concerns about the quality of provision; and affordability.

- **How government can better support family stability** – Parents did not want to feel disempowered by state interventions but do depend from time to time on public services to support their management of family responsibilities. They therefore showed interest in better signposting of support via media campaigns, leaflets and consistent points of contact, such as health visitors. They also felt that provision could be improved, suggesting a need for more discreet and flexible access points, the expansion of the health visitor role throughout childhood, fully trained support workers, and more parent-led support groups.

Joined-up services

- **Current access to children's services** - Parents were aware of a range of services available for children, including both primary and specialist health services, education, Special Educational Needs provision, social services and extra-curricular activities. Parents were not however familiar with the term 'joined-up services'.

- **Experiences of joined-up services –** Multi-agency working was generally thought to be set-up to support children in special circumstances, such as looked-after children or children with complex or special educational needs. In these cases, parents spoke positively about having an established relationship with Social Services which could act as a central point of contact for the family and co-ordinator for other services. Where criticisms did arise, they were surrounding poor communication and a need for better joining up between services. Parents with no existing contact with support services often lacked awareness of where to go to access support, or what was available to them.

- **The ideal joined-up service** – Parents suggested the ideal joined-up service would have the following characteristics:

  o Parents and children at the heart of the service: Control should remain firmly with the parents, who should be the first point of contact for services should professionals have any concerns about the child.
  o School as a focal point: Although parents felt that schools should not shoulder the burden of co-ordinating services, due to familiarity and easy access they were regarded as the ideal 'meeting point' for service provision.
  o A central database: A database containing information about previous contact with agencies was seen as a quick and easy way of accessing and disseminating relevant information about children's needs.
  o An independent service co-ordinator – Parents identified a need for someone with expert knowledge of support in local areas to be available to signpost parents to appropriate agencies, as well as co-ordinate any multi-agency worked deemed necessary in more complex cases.

School information

- **Current use of the school prospectus** – Should any queries arise during

the school year, parents were likely to contact the school directly or rely on school newsletters for information. Therefore the school prospectus was primarily viewed as a tool for choosing a school for their child. However, the usefulness of the school prospectus at this time was limited by a number of issues, including: restricted choice due to catchment areas; the use of other sources such as the internet and word of mouth; the importance of criteria that can not be captured in prospectuses, such as school atmosphere; and the view of prospectuses as sales tools rather than true depiction of the school.

- **Useful information for parents** – When choosing schools, parents valued information about the school's academic record and position in league tables. They would access this via Ofsted reports, the internet and broadsheet newspapers. Practical information such as the number of pupils and IT and sports facilities were often gained from school prospectuses. One of the most significant issues for parents was the school ethos. They would normally gain this through word of mouth, general reputation and most importantly school visits. The most important information for parents once their child is attending school was how their child was performing academically and behaviourally. Parents spoke positively about schools that provided weekly updates that enabled them to gain an up-to-date understanding of their child's learning and development rather than having to wait for annual reports and parent's evenings. The importance of newsletters as a source of practical information covering term dates, school trips and other key issues was also highlighted.

- **How to make prospectuses more useful –** The following suggestions were put forward by parents to improve school prospectuses:

  o More information on academic record: Easy to understand, jargon free details about exam results, position in league tables, Ofsted results and the curriculum are needed.
  o Information on school ethos: Having access to honest views of existing pupils and parents, as well as information on issues such as exclusion rates, teaching styles and approaches to dealing with problematic behaviour was appealing.
  o More practical information: Parents want more detail about teaching staff and governing bodies, including who they are, what they do and how to contact them. The extended services offer also needs to be outlined, as do the school's policies on bullying, health and safety, complaints procedures and SEN provision. This was seen as an area that existing parents could benefit from receiving regular updates.

PARENTS' PANEL 4 HELD ON 9 JULY 2009

Challenges faced by parents

- **Work and finances -** Parents described feeling pressurised into returning to work as they struggled to manage on a reduced wage during maternity leave. Yet there was a perception that employers were not sufficiently flexible to accommodate parents' ideal work-life balance arrangements. This, combined with financial pressures associated with childcare costs, prompted many parents, particularly mothers, to opt for alternative part-time positions that could better accommodate the responsibilities of parenthood and work around school hours.

- **Childcare and education -** Parents found selecting nursery and school places difficult due to limited places and concerns about quality. Parents were also concerned about how to ensure their children were engaged with school. The transition from primary to secondary school was a particular concern for parents, as their young children entered a more adult setting where they could be subject to peer pressure. All parents were concerned by the amount of academic pressure their children were placed under by regular exams and parents of older children particularly worried about the pressure placed on them to make difficult decisions about their future.

- **Family dynamics and communication -** A change in routine and a lack of sleep often led to new parents experiencing relationship problems, and many mothers found the inequality in the distribution of household chores and childcare frustrating, particularly in households where both parents were working. Where relationships had broken down, absent fathers often felt excluded from their children's lives, while lone mothers felt burdened with day-to-day responsibility for the children. As children grew-up parents found it hard managing their developing independence; in particular achieving a balance between encouraging their children to develop and keeping them safe.

- **Parenting skills -** New parents were the least confident in their parenting skills; particularly in relation to children's crying, feeding and health issues. Parents generally felt that effective communication was key to good parenting but sometimes found it tricky, especially as their children got older.

Access to support

- **Parents' preferences -** Parents preferred to seek informal advice and support from friends, family and peers who have been though similar experiences. They also used the Internet to access advice, but tended to conduct general searches via a search engine rather than consult specific parenting websites.

- **Barriers to accessing support -** Parents lacked awareness of what services were available and what support could be provided. Asking for help from professionals was stigmatised and was seen as a sign of being a bad parent. Certain services were also associated with disadvantaged families and therefore parents would not consider accessing them. Further to this, accessing services proved to be problematic, for example being provided at inappropriate times (e.g. during the working day) or only available in more serious cases. Parents also felt that many services (mainly childcare and after school activities) were unaffordable.

- **How to improve support to better meet parents' needs -** Parents felt they would benefit from practical parenting skills and advice, and that classes should be universally available to avoid the stigma of asking for help. Parents suggested that services should be better promoted and that existing services could be extended; for example parents suggested that existing Health Visitors should be extended to parents of older children. Parents also felt that there should be greater Government funding of children's services. Parents suggested that the Government should be more pro-active in promoting flexible working to employers.

Bullying outside of school

- **Dealing with bullying outside of school** - Parents felt that schools should be responsible for dealing with bullying that takes place on journeys to and from school. However, experience showed that often schools were disinterested and unhelpful. Bullying between rival schools was associated with gangs and knife crime. Due to the perceived severity, parents felt that schools and police should take responsibility for dealing with this issue. Anti-social and intimidating behaviour was thought to be less common but parents were least confident about how to deal with it. They did not know where to go for advice on the matter as it was not linked to schools and they felt it was too trivial to concern police.

Cyberbullying

- **Dealing with cyberbullying** - Parents felt that it was important to monitor their children's online and mobile phone behaviour in order to identify cyberbullying. As children got older, parents felt they were less able to do this so would have to rely on their children informing them. If bullying was by a known perpetrator parents suggested they would approach the parent of the bully. If the bully were a pupil at their child's school they felt they could approach the school for assistance. In cases involving unknown perpetrators, the focus was upon preventing the perpetrator from contacting their child. Some parents said they would inform the service provider, but again in order to prevent contact rather than punishing the perpetrator.

- **Support to help parents deal with bullying outside of school** - Parents suggested that schools need to take greater responsibility for bullying outside of schools and be able to signpost parents to support organisations. They also felt they needed better advice about how to support their children, how best to deal with the bully and how to discuss the issue constructively with the parent of the bully. Currently parents felt there was no obvious port of reference for support in the community. They suggested the local community police and youth leaders could take a more active role in preventing bullying in the community.

Internet safety

- **Dealing with the risks** - Parents felt the best way of ensuring internet safety was through monitoring their children's online behaviour. Parents were using software to block inappropriate material, however many expected their children to be capable of getting around security settings. They felt being able to discuss the issue of internet safety with their children was vital. Particularly as children got older, and parents felt they could no longer monitor their online behaviour.

- **Reactions to a one-stop-shop for internet safety** - Parents supported the idea of a one-stop-shop and they were unaware of any existing sites offering advice on the issue. They felt the site should provide links to relevant websites and helplines, a list of reliable security software providers, free downloadable security software, and forums to discuss the issue with other parents and experts. Those who were less confident in their IT skills suggested schools could also run practical sessions for parents to guide them through installing security software.

Reactions to a public awareness campaign - Hard hitting adverts highlighting the dangers of the internet were regarded as a good way to raise

awareness among parents. A storyline in a soap opera was thought to be a good means of encouraging conversations between parents and children about the risks, and also as a good opportunity to provide details about the one-stop-shop and helpline numbers following the programme.

PARENTS' PANEL 5 HELD ON 20 OCTOBER 2009

Parental rights and responsibilities

Parents put forward a range of views on responsibilities they felt they had and discussed whether parental responsibilities should be formalised. Perceptions of possible consequences that would be faced should responsibilities not be met were also discussed and suggestions were given as to how Government could support parents to meet their responsibilities.

- **Responsibilities -** Panel members described how their parental responsibilities took many forms, although overall, responsibilities were broadly based around three key themes:

  - **Supporting a child's education**

    It was common amongst the panel to think of responsibilities in terms of a child's education. Making sure children attended school on time and were appropriately dressed and equipped was considered to be a key responsibility for parents. In addition, helping with homework and study was also considered important, especially amongst parents of secondary school aged children. In addition, parents felt they had a responsibility to engage with the school through events such as parents' evenings.

  - **Teaching a child**

    Parents acknowledged that they had a responsibility to teach their children certain things that would help their child throughout their childhood and later years. The teaching of inter-personal skills such as respect, politeness and manners as well as teaching values and morals such as the difference between right and wrong were felt to be particularly important. Parents of the youngest children felt they had a responsibility to teach their children important life skills such as socialisation and potty-training.

  - **Parental duties**

    Panel members considered themselves to have a responsibility for 'being there' for their child(ren) and to ensure their happiness. Making sure children were physically and mentally healthy and ensuring the safety of their children was a key parental responsibility. Furthermore, listening to and being supportive of children in decisions they made was an important responsibility.

- **Formalising responsibilities -** On the whole, parents were against the notion of formalising the responsibilities of parents and carers, children and young people as it was suggested that this would be difficult to implement. There was also a feeling evident amongst some that such a move could be considered to be 'patronising' towards parents.

- **Consequences -** Parents acknowledged that there were and should be consequences if they did not uphold their responsibilities. For the most part these focussed around legal action. These perceptions were largely felt to have resulted from high profile cases in the media, where parents had been jailed as a result of neglect or their child's truancy from school, for example.

- **Government support -** Parents recognised that Government offered numerous forms of support to help meet their responsibilities but not all were aware of these forms of support. As such, it was suggested that Government needed to do more to promote available support for parents and that some of these should be forms of support, such as free or subsidised access to extra curricular activities such as swimming should be made into parental rights.

Leave entitlements

Awareness of different forms of leave entitlements tended to be fairly good, owing to experiences that parents had of either taking or attempting to take these. However, understanding specifics of different forms of leave, in terms of what they were entitled to was found to be lower. It was widely believed that most forms of leave were granted at the discretion of an employer, especially concerning the amount of leave given to parents and how much pay, if any they would receive for this.

- **Suggestions -** Parents offered a number of suggestions for how leave entitlements could be improved. Broadly, there were three overall views about parental entitlement to leave:

  o Firstly that there was considered to be a need for **better promotion of leave entitlement information** to make parents aware of the statutory rules around taking different forms of leave.

  o Secondly it was felt that the **provision of free childcare for all through nursery and playschool places or crèches in workplaces** would mean parents would be less likely to take emergency childcare or compassionate leave.

  o Thirdly, parents suggested that **businesses should develop company protocols for parents wishing to take leave to spend time with their children**. It was felt this could be conducted in a similar way to those which employees themselves use when they wish to take annual leave and would make things clearer for both parties involved.

Support with work and financial pressures

It was not uncommon for parents to have experienced financial pressure as a result of the recession. 'Getting by' and finding suitable forms of employment was difficult for parents to achieve and it was suggested that Government could support parents in a number of ways in order to ease these pressures:

- **Extra childcare provision -** It was felt that if childcare was free, or heavily subsidised there would be fewer financial challenges for parents in terms of organising childcare arrangements and finding employment that was suitable in terms of hours worked and salary paid.

- **Additional guidance and advice -** Parents suggested that clear guidance from Government about what employees and employers were entitled to in terms of leave entitlements should be circulated to businesses to avoid any confusion or inequality. Additionally, parents acknowledged that there was a need for improved information and advice services on financial issues. It was felt that current services were either over-subscribed, such as Citizen's Advice Bureaus (CAB) or too expensive, such as the services provided by Independent Financial Advisers.

- **Provision of financial support -** Provision of financial support in difficult times was felt to be the most important thing that Government could do to support parents under financial pressure. Of particular importance was a notion that emergency funds could be created to help parents with mortgage repayments as the idea of losing one's home was considered to be the worst thing that could happen for children.

Child naming ceremonies

Parents had a wide range of experiences of child naming ceremonies and these occasions were generally considered in a positive light. Benefits of these types of ceremonies tended to focus on bringing families together to celebrate the life of a new child. However child naming ceremonies were generally considered to be private and personal affairs and were not an area where Government should be involved.

The role of grandparents

Grandparents were perceived to play a vital role in childcare responsibilities providing they were willing and able. A number of barriers for using grandparents as a form of childcare were suggested and these tended to be based around physical, mental and prior commitment factors:

- **Physical barriers -** Key barriers mentioned by the panel were physical

barriers, which were felt to be difficult to overcome. Old age, health and disabilities, geographical location and accessibility were all considered to limit to role grandparents played.

- **Mental and emotional barriers -** Barriers relating to mental or emotional factors were found to be less common amongst the panel, albeit no less significant than others. Reluctance from parents to ask for help and from grandparents to be involved, threat of grandparents interfering in parenting styles and unsuitable personalities of grandparents were cited as reasons for lack of involvement amongst some grandparents.

- **Prior commitments of grandparents -** Grandparents having active social lives, work responsibilities and other care responsibilities were all felt to impact on the level of childcare support provided by grandparents.

It was largely believed that Government should be able to empower grandparents to take on caring responsibilities providing that parents and grandparents were happy with this form of childcare.

The use of language

Words, phrases and statements used by DCSF were given mixed reactions by parents in terms of how well they understood them. The main issues with the terms and statements presented was felt to be in relation to ambiguity and lack of clarity. Interestingly, words and phrases were generally felt to be more open to interpretation than statements with the terms 'Protective factors', 'Third sector', 'Resilience' and 'Family intervention projects' being considered the most unclear. A number of suggestions were made as to how to improve language which could be used in the Families and Relationships Green Paper. For instance, parents suggested simplifying the language and making statements more concise.

PARENTS' PANEL 6 HELD ON 26 JANUARY 2010

Family Information Direct

The sixth Parents' Panel ran parallel to another DCSF event showcasing the new Family Information Direct (FID) services available to parents and carers. FID is an 'umbrella term' used to describe a range of 19 services provided by private and third sector organisations. Sixteen services were showcased during the event that ran alongside the sixth Parents' Panel. During the day, parents were given two opportunities to browse the FID exhibits on display.

Views of FID services and likelihood of using them

Overall, parents were left with positive impressions of FID services and were generally inquisitive and interested in the services displayed. Parents said that they would be more than likely to access some FID services and that their friends and relatives who were parents would also be likely to seek information and advice through FID. The parents felt that services on offer should be consistent between locations. Advisers and support staff working for the services should have local knowledge themselves or be able to refer parents to someone within their Local Authority.

Of all the service exhibits visited by parents, two online services were held in particularly high regard – *parentchannel.tv* and *RelateforParents.* An important element of these services was the medium through which they were accessed – the internet, which meant anonymity for the customer. Of the telephone services showcased during the event, *Parentline Plus* was felt to be a particularly useful resource for all parents. Parents liked the continuity of the customer service employed, in that one could call an adviser at *Parentline Plus*, discuss issues with them and then call the same adviser back at a later date to discuss outcomes of suggestions they may have offered.

Views on gaining information in ways other than those utilised by FID

Parents who were not computer literate or who lacked immediate internet access were disappointed that many FID services were only available through accessing them via the internet. Parents without internet access suggested that they would like to be able to access the Family Information Directory through services in their local communities, such as computers in libraries, Sure Start Children's Centres or through school's extended services.

Increasing awareness of FID

Parents commented that the information about FID, featured in the showcase, should be made accessible to more parents so that they too, could become aware of the support available to them. Parents suggested a range of ways in which people's awareness of FID could be improved, such as through a road show in local public buildings, exhibitions at parents' evenings and information in the bounty pack when pregnant or at different transition points in life. Parents also suggested that the current promotion DCSF were running through *Chat* and *Take a Break* magazines, whereby a range of parenting issues were discussed in each issue was valuable in increasing awareness of services to parents that may prefer information presented through print media.

The Families and Relationships Green Paper

Parents were asked to consider three consultation questions, which appeared in the latest Families and Relationships Green Paper: *Support for all*.

What more can Government do to help create a culture in which seeking help for relationships or parenting problems, or other family difficulties is considered socially acceptable?

Parents suggested two main ways that the government could help make seeking family and relationships support more socially acceptable. Firstly this could be achieved through bringing the associated support services into the mainstream, alongside other services, such as doctors' surgeries. Secondly, parents suggested that seeking support could become more socially acceptable through existing services changing the ways they operate, to make them more friendly and approachable. For example, the Government could encourage a higher level of customer service training to be given to staff working on the 'front line' of support services and encourage the use of alternative terminologies, such as replacing the term 'problem' with 'concern'.

What issues should be prioritised by Government in seeking to strengthen families and support relationships?

Parents suggested the following two areas should be prioritised in seeking to strengthen families and support relationships.

- **Provision of emergency childcare and leave entitlements:** The need to take time out of work commitments in order to care for a child that was unwell, and the loss of income this commonly brought were felt to be common reasons for disputes occurring between family members. Parents felt that there needed to be more information about different forms of emergency childcare available in their local area. In addition, the Government could encourage employers to better understand the pressures placed on parents when they needed to care for ill children.

- **Emphasising the importance of spending time as a family:** Parents of primary school aged children felt that the Government needed to remind parents of the importance of spending time with their children and the rest of their families. It was suggested that Government should take a 'soft' approach to this issue to avoid any feelings that the state was interfering in what some considered to be private, family matters.

Which services need most development in order to make them truly family friendly?

Parents were united in agreement that there were three types of services which were most in need of being developed to make them more family friendly. These were:

- education services, such as schools and schools' extended services;
- health services, such as medical centres; and
- social services, such as dyslexia action.

There was a consensus that the main issue making services 'family unfriendly' was accessibility; both in terms of physical access and opening times. The time services took to deal with issues was also of particular importance.

Other issues with education services were considered to be poor communication channels and poor behaviour in schools.

Pupil and Parent Guarantees (PPG)

Understanding of Pupil and Parent Guarantees

Panellists understood the general purpose of the PPG - that it was a document setting out, in one place the entitlements and requirements of pupils and parents, schools and Local Authorities in Britain. Parents also generally understood the content of the PPGs and were satisfied with the level of detail included for the guarantees and provisions outlined. However, there were a number of omissions that parents felt should have been included in the document such as information on how the PPGs would be enforced after a complaint had been made.

The clarity of the language used in the PPG was commonly called into question by parents, both in terms of general language used and specific terms employed in individual guarantees. Parents felt that much of the language used could be open to interpretation and that schools would be able to translate the PPG in their own way. Parents also highlighted that pupils were referred to in different ways throughout the document (i.e. by age or year group); and that using age would be most clear.

Views of Pupil and Parent Guarantees

Parents generally held broadly positive views about the document, believing that the theory and principle of the PPG was a good idea and very encouraging. Parents were pleased that the PPG was intended to be a publicly available document that they would be able to refer to, should they contest something that the school was doing, or felt that the school was not conforming to what the guarantees outlined. Parents also pointed towards the fact that PPGs may facilitate more universality and equality between schools. This said, doubts were expressed about how the document could be made to work in practice, for example, how easy it would be to ensure schools and academies uphold the guarantees and provisions. There was also concern that the PPGs could be 'swept under the carpet' and ignored by schools or used as a 'box ticking exercise', which could possibly distract schools and academies from teaching.

Complaints procedures

The complaints procedure was generally considered to be a positive addition to the PPGs, in that parents were pleased there was a procedure set out, which escalated issues, should they not be dealt with at school level. However, there was also some criticism around the complaints procedure and the effort it would take parents to escalate a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). Parents also suggested that the LGO may be inundated with complaints and that this would cause a 'bottle neck' situation whereby complaints took a long time to be resolved once they reached LGO level.

Parents' Panel - One year on

Overall, parents felt privileged to be part of the Parents' Panel and saw it as an insightful and worthwhile project. Parents were also grateful for the way in which the DCSF had demonstrated their interest in the views of parents themselves. Parents felt that the general public should be made more aware of consultations, such as Parents' Panel, and the issues discussed during them.

Impact of parents Panel

Parents felt that the 'Panel had two major achievements in terms of its impact. First, parents were aware of the impact that their contributions to 'Panel events had on policy making development. This was especially brought to attention during the sixth event, in which members of DCSF's policy teams highlighted the role the Parents' Panel played in facilitating ideas for the *Support for All* Green Paper. The Panel members were also given a 'Parents' Panel – one year on' booklet which showed how some of the recommendations and ideas they had offered during the deliberative events had shaped and influenced the Department's policies.

The second was the benefit arising from being a member of the Parents' Panel in terms of raising their awareness, knowledge and understanding of family and parenting relating issues. Respondents felt that they had learnt information through all aspects of the events – policy presentations; group and plenary discussions; and through the video ethnography element.

Suggested topics for future events

In terms of future Panels, parents suggested that they would like to build on and extend the discussions conducted around the Pupil and Parent Guarantee (PPG) to the role of teachers and how teachers were trained and 'quality checked'. Parents also anecdotally mentioned that they would like to revisit certain topics, such as bullying, which were discussed during the first year of the Panel as they felt more time should be devoted to them.

Family mediation

Family mediation is a process that can be used to resolve disputes that arise before, during and after the breakdown of a family relationship. It can also be used before, during and after court proceedings. Parents were asked for their views on family mediation, including suggestions for improving the process and whether mediation sessions should be made compulsory for all families attempting to resolve a dispute.

Views on family mediation

Overall, the concept of family mediation was welcomed and supported by parents. Parents felt that family mediation was a viable alternative to court proceedings and that it could even be perceived as advantageous when compared to litigation. For example, through mediation centres providing a controlled environment that facilitated a dialogue between parents, if this had previously broken down. However, parents felt that mediation would only work where parents wanted it to work.

The cost of mediation was a factor that was considered by all parents in determining their views on the concept. The costs of the sessions initially discouraged parents from taking a positive view on the value of family mediation. However, in comparison to the cost of taking a case to court, parents looked upon the cost of mediation in a more favourable light.

The potentially shorter time needed for the mediation process was largely considered to be positive by parents. Parents recognised that, if successful, mediation would be a quicker way to resolve a dispute than entering court proceedings.

Parents generally viewed mediation as having fewer adverse affects on children than court proceedings, providing that mediation was a suitable method to utilise and that the process ran smoothly.

Making mediation compulsory for all

Currently, people eligible for public funding are required to attend a mediation information and assessment meeting if they are seeking to resolve a dispute through the courts. Parents were asked their views on whether these sessions should become compulsory in all cases.

Overall, parents were in favour of offering mandatory information and assessment sessions on mediation for couples experiencing family breakdowns. Parents felt that making these sessions compulsory would raise parents' awareness of the alternative option to court proceedings for resolving a dispute.

Parents held mixed views over the idea of making the entire process of mediation compulsory for all families seeking legal action over a dispute. Whilst parents valued the concept of mediation generally, there were a number of concerns about making the process compulsory. Broadly, these were:

- Mediation would not be suitable for addressing all types of family disputes;
- Compulsory mediation could impinge on parents' freedom of choice;
- Families could begin to view mediation as 'another link in the chain' in the divorce process, rather than as an alternative to court proceedings;
- Families could miss out on services, such as CAFCASS when a case goes to court; and
- There would be cost implications, particularly if one party was in receipt of legal aid

Suggestions for improving family mediation

Overall, it was felt that parents needed to be more aware of mediation and that advertising campaigns demonstrating its benefits needed to be more widely available.

There was support for the idea of introducing a kite mark to the mediation profession, with this holding connotations that the service was of a high standard and administered by trained professionals. Above all though, parents wanted to have assurance that mediators had previous experience of mediating family relationship breakdowns and had been thoroughly trained in mediation skills.

Parents suggested a range of factors that could help increase the take-up of mediation amongst families. By and large, suggestions focussed around the need to improve awareness of the service through promotion. It was felt that television, radio, websites and magazines would be the most suitable channels through which to run advertising campaigns as these platforms would target 'ordinary people'. Other locations, such as doctors' surgeries, libraries and Sure Start Children's Centres, were also mentioned as places where advertising would be most effective.

Removing the leave requirement

Current practice requires that before family members and others can apply to the court for a contact order for a child, they must get the court's permission to apply. DCSF were interested to gauge parental opinion on the notion of removing the application for leave for grandparents.

Views on removing the leave requirement

Overall, parents felt that the best interests of the child should always be considered when debating whether or not to remove the leave requirement. The importance of children having contact with extended family members was acknowledged, but parents were also aware that in some cases, this was not always possible. For example, in cases where an extended family member had

no desire for contact with the child. For this reason, there was an overall tendency for parents to disagree with the removal of the leave requirement for grandparents.

Who the leave requirement should apply to

On the whole, parents felt that grandparents should not be distinct from other members of the extended family in terms of the leave requirement. In many cases, other members of the extended family and even those from outside it, such as friends and neighbours, were considered to be more important in a child's life than grandparents. The majority of parents felt that each family is different in terms of the children's relationships with extended family and others and it would be unfair to create a rule, such as exemption from the requirement to obtain leave that privileged one set of extended family members over another.

How grandparents should be defined in relation to the leave requirement

Respondents were generally of the opinion that grandparents should not be given preferential treatment over other extended family members in regards to the leave requirement. However, if there were a need to define grandparents as a distinct group, parents suggested that the definition needed to be applicable to different types of grandparents. The definition should include different types of grandparents other than just the biological parents of the child's parents; for example, step-grandparents.

Improving behaviour in schools

Parents were asked about how behaviour could be improved in schools through exploring: their views on how perceptions of behaviour affect school choice; what parents wanted to know about the behaviour of their children whilst at school; perceptions of good and poor behaviour and how to improve these; and suggestions of how to facilitate good behaviour and tackle poor behaviour.

The extent to which perceptions of behaviour affect choice of school

Parents stated that the perceived behaviour of pupils at particular schools or nurseries did affect the choice of school or nursery to which they sent their children. Parental impressions of behaviour at schools and nurseries tended to be based on perceptions, rather than experiences. However, when the level of discipline or standard of behaviour at a particular institution was judged to have been low or in decline, parents were more than willing to withdraw their child and place them into an alternative institution. It was not uncommon for parents to consider or to do this, and some parents recounted how they had even moved house in order to get their child into school or nursery with a better standard of behaviour.

What parents want to know about their child's behaviour

Parents strongly felt that they wanted to know about the behaviour of their children when at school, both in terms of good and poor behaviour. Many parents already received communication from their child's school, either on an ad-hoc basis when behaviour had been particularly poor, or on a weekly basis, charting general behaviour standards.

Despite this, there were clear variations in the extent to which schools communicated with parents. Some did not receive any communication until occasions such as parent's evenings, whereas others received levels of communication which were considered to be 'over the top'. Parents suggested that in order for communication between schools and themselves to be effective, it was imperative that it was provided as quickly as possible. Behaviour, particularly poor behaviour, needed to be highlighted to parents as soon as possible to allow the best chance of addressing an issue.

Perceptions of pupils and schools with good and poor behaviour

The parents identified three key characteristics of schools with pupils that exhibited a high standard of behaviour. These were:

- a strong head teacher;
- respect for others; and
- a high standard of physical appearance

In terms of pupils themselves, physical appearance, such as the standard of school uniform was particularly important, both when pupils were in and out of school. It was not uncommon for parents to think that a well maintained uniform was a strong indication of respect and discipline.

Parents considered that schools and pupils with poor behaviour generally exhibited characteristics that were in opposition to those which were felt to embody good behaviour. Traits such as having a head teacher who was perceived to be unable to manage a school effectively; pupils with little or no respect for others and their property; and a poor standard of physical appearance were all felt to contribute to a poorly behaved pupil. In addition, bad attitudes and a lack of manners, often manifested through swearing and disregard for others were also perceived as factors which contributed to a poorly behaved pupil.

Facilitating good behaviour and tackling poor behaviour

Parents suggested a range of factors, which could assist in facilitating good behaviour. Broadly, these factors were split into three stratums of perceived effectiveness: very effective; those seen to be partly effective; and factors which were not considered to be effective. These are summarised in the diagram below.

Young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

The panel members discussed ideas for how to reduce the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training through debating: the challenges that parents of young people face around their post-16 options; the influence different groups had over young people when considering their post-16 options; and awareness of support provisions available for school leavers.

Challenges faced by parents of young people considering post-16 decisions

Parents were mostly concerned about their children obtaining a job after finishing education. For parents of children of school leaving age, this tended to manifest itself in their concerns about their children gaining appropriate work experience. Parents were commonly relied upon to assist in arranging a placement and for some, this was not always easy; especially when children wanted work experience in industries in which parents had no contacts.

Influencers on post-16 decisions

Overall, parents felt friends and peer groups would have the most influence over post-16 options, particularly if a young person had many close friends. Interestingly though, the key influencers differed depending on the age of the child. For example, the degree of influence of peer groups was felt to be less so when children under the age of sixteen were considering their post-16 options. For younger children, parents felt celebrities, such as sports personalities and musicians held the most influence.

Awareness and knowledge of post-16 support provisions

Parents were fairly well informed about the provision available to support young people leaving the compulsory education system, both in terms of financial and other types of support such as careers advice. However, in-depth knowledge of support provision was found to be lacking on the whole. Unsurprisingly, those with children that had already left school and had gone into further or higher education and work were most aware of available provision.

Suggestions for how Government can support parents to help their children with post-16 decisions

> Parents suggested a range of measures that would support them in helping their children with their post-16 options and to reduce the chance that their children would become NEET. Overall, and in line with the challenges that parents faced around young people's post-16 options, suggestions tended to focus around the issue of giving young people the opportunity to gain varied work experience. This would enable young people to try out working in different environments to give them firmer ideas of what they could do; and give them valuable work experience at the same time.

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