

**Call for evidence: DfES/HM Treasury Joint Policy Review on Children and Young People**

<b>Contact details for respondent</b>	
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Job title	Director
Do you represent an organisation?  (if so, name of organisation and type: e.g. voluntary, public body, private company).	Yes  Capacity  Social Enterprise (Policy and consultancy)
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	<b>Which area of the review are you responding to? (please mark X)</b>
Prevention strand	x
Review of disabled children	
Strategy for youth services	
Review of high cost, high harm families	x

Capacity is a public interest body and consulting practice, offering strategic support to statutory and other bodies involved in the creation and delivery of children's services and developing fresh perspectives for improving the quality of children's lives.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the DfES/HM Treasury Joint Policy Review on Children and Young People. In summary, our recommendations are for spending priorities to be further balanced towards the early years; for enhanced levels of funding for children's centres to support families in need; for a more comprehensive policy to support parents who lack the skills and qualifications which would help them to move into work; and for the development of a skills set and resources which would help those working with children and families to better understand the impact of poverty and the key elements of community-focussed services.

## **The Main Review**

**To identify how services for children and young people from 0 to 19 and their families can build on the three principles identified in *Support for Parents, the best start for children – rights and responsibilities*, progressive universalism and prevention - to improve outcomes for children and young people.**

Equality of opportunity and the best start for all children have, since 1997, driven government policy and investment. A great deal has been achieved – through investment in childcare, health, education and other services and through the Change for Children programme, creating an integrated framework for the delivery of children's services.

But more is needed. Children cannot be considered in isolation from their families and communities. Children are poor largely because their families are not in paid work, or are in work which is low-paid or insecure or short-term.

Around 3 million children still live in poverty, mainly because of worklessness and/or low earnings. Poverty impacts on health, well-being, parenting, family and community relationships.

Education and income inequality have an impact on social cohesion. The UK has some of the highest indicators for social exclusion, particularly for teenage pregnancies and marital breakdown.

The government's approach is right, but spending priorities need to be balanced further towards the early years and primary years, providing a still larger element of universal childcare together with extended opportunities for parents to access family support and education or training in their neighbourhoods. In addition, the nature of

public institutions and their relationship with deprived communities needs to be considered and adapted to create a culture in which there is a greater degree of genuine participation. With more community ownership, children's centres and schools could make a significant contribution to social cohesion, job creation and community enterprise

### ***Childcare***

Childcare is essential for many families as a means of sustaining employment, supporting children's development and – as a universal service – providing an access point to more specialised services.

But many childcare places, including some provided by children's centres in the most deprived areas are not used by the poorest families, who are not in employment or are on very low pay.

In Tower Hamlets, the fourth most deprived local authority in the country, unemployment rates are among the highest, not just for London, but for England and Wales as a whole. Within the borough, nearly 60% of children live in poverty and among the Bangladeshi and black minority ethnic community, poverty is higher still. In the early part of 2006, a childcare sufficiency study, undertaken by Capacity, considered parents' needs for childcare within the borough. A key finding was that while parents, for the most part, are able to find the type of care they need, a significant number of families make no use of childcare, other than the free entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds, mainly because they are not in employment, or are unable to pay. Within this group are some of the poorest families within the borough.

In Thurrock, where Capacity undertook a similar mapping exercise, parents use a wide range of different types of childcare, sometimes in combination, but depend more on relatives to care for their children than on formal childcare. In the deprived wards in Thurrock, those parents earning under £15,000 a year were less likely to be in work and/or to make use of childcare.

In Hillingdon, where Capacity has been involved in supporting children's centre strategy, a similar pattern exists in the most deprived wards to the south of the borough where, among the families thought to be most vulnerable, use of childcare and other services, including primary health care, is sufficiently low to be a cause for concern.

The targeting of additional childcare places in economically disadvantaged wards and the working families tax credits are purposeful in terms of offering families on the lowest incomes help to enter employment – in policy terms - making work pay.

Yet for many parents living in those areas the available employment opportunities and the competing needs of their children may prevent work from being a meaningful choice. If, as a result, they do not make use of childcare, key opportunities for accessing support for themselves and for their children will be missed.

The core offer of children's centres requires them to provide a range of parent and child services. For this to be effective, funding needs to be provided and sustained at a level which enables them to work developmentally with families, providing subsidised or free childcare where it is needed, both for the child's development and to support parents up to the point where they may be able, realistically, to find and keep employment.

Poorer families would also be helped by the introduction of a universal free entitlement of early education and childcare for children under 3, currently the subject of a pilot scheme in selected local authorities.

In countries where universal provision is long established and regarded as part of citizenship, this is reflected in usage and take-up. Universal services, available to all, when needed, are necessary if outcomes for all children are to be improved.

### ***Supporting pathways into employment***

There are a number of barriers which deter or prevent parents from moving into employment. Where childcare places are not used by the poorest families in order to work, it is often because these are the same areas where 40% or 50% of the adult population lack qualifications.

In Thurrock, the Thames Gateway development is bringing economic development, housing and population growth, but the focus of the local strategic plan is to prevent local adult residents from remaining locked into poverty because of poor skills.

The policy framework for improving adult literacy, language and numeracy skills is set out in the government's *Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills*. Twenty-six million people of working age are thought to have levels of literacy and numeracy below those expected of school leavers.

Parents with poor skills form one of the target groups, and lone parents are a key target group among benefit claimants. Around a third of lone parents with children aged between 6 and 15 are thought to have poor literacy skills and almost 40 per cent have poor numeracy skills.

Thurrock children's centres are pioneering new ways of helping parents through supported learning and skills training. Childcare is an integral part of the package. Designed and managed by Capacity, *Wishes* is a partnership project to engage unemployed or low-paid parents in basic skills and employment-related training. Partner organisations include local colleges, the Learning Partnership, and voluntary organisations.

*Wishes* has tackled some of the practical barriers to training and finding employment but the more innovative aspects of the programme relate to building self-esteem among a group of more than 100 parents whose experiences of education have been largely negative or who have had difficult life experiences. The results have been dramatically positive. One year into the project, these new learners have achieved a combined total of 51 full accredited qualifications; many are undertaking vocational training and 6 are in employment.

In other local authority areas, there are other isolated projects addressing the same needs, whether in Sure Start children's centres or family learning projects. In theory, the model is highly replicable. Universal services, particularly early years and childcare settings, have ready access to parents and many can offer an accessible base for family learning and other training opportunities and thus support parents in the transition to work. This should and could be part of their core offer.

Adult education funding is currently insufficient to meet the needs of those over the age of 19 and is overly focussed on level 2 and level 3 qualifications, when, for the most vulnerable adults, the need is, initially for basic skills support at level 1 or below.

In its annual survey of participation, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has consistently found socio-economic class to be a key determinant of participation in adult learning. In 2005, while a third of all adults surveyed had not participated in further learning since leaving full-time education, among the lowest income groups, this figure was 55%.

Among many of the poorest families in Tower Hamlets, study rather than employment was found to be the significant reason for needing childcare. To be properly effective in this respect, childcare needs to be more widely available, both to support attendance at courses, for initial and other diagnostic testing and for the national tests and other assessments.

Parenting is a challenging responsibility at any time. Poverty, isolation, poor health or competing responsibilities at work make it harder. What is required is a more substantial and universal offer to all parents, reflecting the importance of the early years and the significance of the family as a context for learning.

### **Accessing services and services for families and children at risk**

The concept of “hard-to-reach” has become part of the everyday vocabulary of those working in services for children and families. So too is “locked into a cycle of underachievement”.

And there are many isolated families and individuals, some of them, as described by the terms of reference of the policy review, “caught in a cycle of low attainment, high cost and high harm”. Ultimately, some children may always need to be protected from their families, or legal sanctions used to protect the community.

But the problem with formulations such as “hard to reach” or “under-achieving” is that they fail to animate the ways in which public services, or aspects of public services can be intrinsically off-putting or inaccessible to people.

In the field of literacy and numeracy, researchers have conceptualised “community focussed provision”, the key feature of which is a willingness to invert conventional ways of thinking and to work in a more developmental way to match the learning process to the needs of learners.

Of 348 looked-after children in Hillingdon, between April 2004 and March 2005, 63% were drawn from the seven most disadvantaged wards in the south of the borough. A similar pattern exists in relation to child protection. Only one of the seven wards - Townfield - which has been served by the one Sure Start local programme within the borough contradicts this trend. The Townfield Sure Start programme, now a children’s centre, has been able to fund childcare on the basis of need, irrespective of the child’s age and to work intensively with families through a well-developed out-reach capability. The Triple P Parenting programme, developed in Hillingdon, provides a very good model of progressive universalism and effectiveness.

## ***Addressing the culture of poverty***

Every Child Matters will affect the way in which children will in future experience schools, health and welfare services and the criminal justice system. Its main beneficiaries are intended to be children in care, vulnerable children, those at risk of under-achievement or ill health, teenage parents – in other words, all those likely to be experiencing, disproportionately, the impact of poverty.

As part of developing community-focussed services, there is a clear case for ensuring that all those who work with children and families understand poverty, as an economic reality and in its impact on child development, parenting and family and community dynamics.

It would now be unthinkable for anyone working with children not to have had at least a rudimentary equal opportunities training to support inclusion and to combat stereotyping. Lack of understanding of poverty can create all kind of misunderstandings, from why parents fail to turn up to appointments to the ways in which a child's sometimes conflicting experiences of home, school and social networks are affected by poverty and exclusion.

The proposed occupational standards for the reformed children's workforce are silent about poverty. However, many of those working in schools, nurseries and other services have no personal experience of poverty and of its impact on family life. In this context, any failure of initiatives to engage the hard-to-reach may simply reflect an unintended and overlooked lack of appropriate skills and strategies rather than any deeper fault-line within the initiative.

## ***Building Capacity***

The question of how to build the capacity of parents, families and communities to shape the design and delivery of services for children and young people has no simple answer. And within the UK, where representative democracy regularly engages only a minority of the electorate and where consumerism and individualism are dominant values, social exclusion is, almost by definition, a state of being in which those affected are not heard or do not believe themselves to be heard.

Government can offer a lead, by offering guidance and good practice on community-led children's centres and schools and in particular, new social enterprise models for delivering these services. Government can also help by acknowledging the potential tension between, on the one hand, creating a qualified and professional workforce and on the other, enabling opportunities for parents to participate whether in voluntary or paid roles.

The voluntary sector has a clear role to play. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, organisations like the WEA provided opportunities for people to find identity and purpose and to enter rewarding relationships with others in pursuit of shared educational aims. Those same organisations provided an introduction and training in democratic participation and organisations, which is why so many of those involved went on to utilise these skills in political life. The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a further, more recent, example. The Co-operative movement is renewing itself today, developing new childcare places

Community Mothers, the name given to a national network of home visiting undertaken by mothers from the community, with accredited training, is a particularly

good example of user involvement allied to strong professional credentials. In Thurrock it is now mainstreamed within the PCT

The *First Steps Nursery*, a voluntary sector children's centre, is based in Twerton, just outside Bath, but in a "pocket" of disadvantage, with some of the highest indicators for deprivation in Europe.

Within First Steps there is continuous exchange between the roles of parents and professionals. By the end of its seventh year, 48% of parent users had entered work and 43% accessed some form of education.

In a project supported by Natwest Bank, Capacity is currently working with two children's centres and one extended school, in three local authority areas, to help develop them as full social enterprises, using the community interest company as a possible model of governance. The aim is to integrate the required core offer with opportunities for participation by the local community, training and job creation and the formation of partnerships with other agencies and with the business community.

In each of the three areas links are being established with training providers, to support parents into self-employment or to create a bank of childcare workers, or other work experience opportunities.

What all of these projects have in common is an emphasis on participation through *doing*, lack of rigid demarcation lines and a fluid and developing pattern of activities. An added value is in helping parents to realise the economic and vocational potential of the skills they already have. Their efficacy merits further examination and models like these for the effective engagement of parents and children should be developed and disseminated through guidance.

In essence, for parents and the community to shape services, emerging policy will require a conceptual re-think – less reaching *out* to the community and more being *of* the community – entailing a different approach to leadership and a changing role for professionals.

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