1. Introduction

This document is aimed at parents, carers and any other people with an interest in the services for families in South Gloucestershire. In this document, the term ‘parent’ is used to mean parents and carers (anyone with caring responsibility for a child).

South Gloucestershire Council and its partners highlighted parenting support as an important issue in its Children and Young People Plan 2006-2009. As a way of focusing on Parenting Support, the partners set up the Parenting Support Strategy Steering Group which would plan what and how services would be available to families in the coming years. They then asked The Care Forum to contact parents to find out what they wanted from services, what they appreciated about the current services for families and what they thought could be done better.

This report shows what parents said in the consultation. The main methods used for getting the views of parents were group discussions (9 groups) and questionnaires (116 questionnaires). The Care Forum would like to thank all the parents and carers who took part in the study.

2. Findings

Information for parents

Parents highlighted the importance of up-to-date information about the availability of different services in South Gloucestershire. A large proportion of parents were unaware of the 1Big Database service. The report shows the need for continued marketing and development of 1 Big Database alongside a commitment to the continued availability of directories and other paper-based information for parents. As 1 Big Database develops work needs to continue on ways to make the database easy to use and accessible to parents.

[Note: 1 Big Database is an internet-based information service for children, young people, parents and carers living in South Gloucestershire, Bristol and Bath. It is available at www.1bigdatabase.org.uk]
Communication with parents

Listening was an important theme in the positive accounts that parents offered about their relationships with professionals. Parents were discouraged by professionals who seemed too busy to listen to their point of view. Comments made by parents in the Chinese group suggest that there may be some cultural differences at play in the communications between GPs and Chinese parents. Some parents expressed confusion about the structures of education in the UK and the expectations of children at specific ages. This suggests a need for basic information for parents who are new to the UK education system.

This consultation also identified more general problems with basic communications with parents; for example situations where parents’ needs were not listened to or where parents found it difficult to make contact with professionals when they needed it. Creating responsive services is a crucial aspect of any move towards a preventative model for service provision.

Access to services

Parents spoke about the long waiting lists and the inaccessibility of specialist services for the families of children with acute needs. Even in situations which were thought of as urgent by parents (and in some cases by professionals) parents had waited for considerable periods of time for a service from Children & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in particular. There was also a negative assessment of housing services by parents who had experienced domestic violence and also by young parents. In these accounts, parents described services which were unsympathetic to their needs. One parent expressed difficulty in making routine GP appointments. It may be that families are disadvantaged in the way that some surgery appointments are currently organised.

Flexible help for families

Professionals who took an interest in the family’s day-to-day life, who helped parents to gain access to other services and who showed an understanding of practical obstacles to using services were praised by parents in the study. Even when parents’ needs cannot be accommodated, professionals can demonstrate an understanding of the difficulties faced by parents who may have to juggle multiple journeys and commitments to get the support that their families need.
Mutual support for parents

It is evident from the consultations that parents value spaces where they are able to meet with others and discuss issues in an informal setting. Increasing the opportunity for peer support would contribute to prevention and early intervention. The development of opportunities for peer support has a number of benefits including:

- Space for parents to develop valuable friendships which potentially can support parents over a number of years
- Opportunities for parents to gain informal input from other parents in the form of ideas and suggestions about parenting and information about services
- Avenues for professionals to deliver parenting input to parents in a setting which may be more easily reached than attendance at a formal parenting course
- Opportunities for children to meet, play and socialise with the associated benefits for their development.

It is noted that in recent months, two successful young mothers’ groups in South Gloucestershire have been closed due to lack of funds.

Parenting training

In this consultation, parents were asked to identify their interest in specific aspects of parenting training. The most popular topics of interest to parents were: ‘how to build your child’s confidence’, ‘dealing with difficult or challenging behaviour’ and ‘supporting your child’s learning’. Parents showed a preference for courses in the evening or daytime compared to courses run at weekends and they highlighted the importance of social aspects of meeting to undertake parenting training. Parents of children with learning difficulties felt that general parenting training was often not relevant to their needs.

3. Recommendations

1) 1 Big Database should be more specifically aimed at parents and the kinds of issues for which they need support. The website should give examples which identify a particular problem that the parent might have and how they might find an appropriate service for that issue.

2) The Children and Young People Information Service should be more strongly advertised as a place where parents can discuss an issue with a telephone advisor who can work with the person to identify the services most likely to meet their needs.

3) 1 Big Database should give clear signposting to the telephone service to those who have been unsuccessful in finding the service that they want using the database.

4) Consideration should be given to how mobile phones might be used to publicise services, particularly where services aim to attract young parents.
5) Professionals should be constantly reminded of the importance of listening to the views and expressed needs of parents. Good listening should be embedded into everyday practice and managers should consider the organisational barriers which prevent professionals from carrying out this basic skill.

6) Professionals in South Gloucestershire should be providing a responsive service which replies promptly to requests for help whether or not a particular staff member is available.

7) Cultural awareness training should be provided for all professionals engaging with parents and carers in South Gloucestershire. This training should be regularly reviewed and updated.

8) Current guides for parents provide extensive information about admission to primary and secondary school but these should be made more accessible for those who are unfamiliar with the UK school system.

9) When professionals refer parents to a service, they should note down the referral and monitor whether or not the parent has received a service.

10) Consideration should be given to whether or not parents need an interim service or scheduled meetings with the professional who has referred them while they wait to be assessed for the service to which they have been referred.

11) In cases where there is no designated lead professional, consideration should be given to referral to a service which will support parents, children and young people into appropriate services, hold caseloads and support parents while they wait for a service. The Children and Young People Information Service is currently establishing this service at Sure Start Children’s Centres in South Gloucestershire.

[Note: A lead professional is a named person who is identified to support and communicate with a family in situations where a child is assessed as needing support from several different services. The lead professional’s role is to listen to the views of parents and children and young people and to be a single point of contact for the many services received by the family.]

12) A service is needed to provide advocacy for the parents of disabled children or children with learning disabilities. Advocates would take on the role of helping parents to access services in situations where the parents’ relationship to services is complex or difficult or where a lead professional has not been appointed.

13) Training in domestic violence issues and policy should be available and mandatory for all housing officers. This training should be evaluated to see what impact it has on the practice of housing officers.

14) The Primary Care Trust and GPs should review appointments systems and other procedures to ensure that services are family friendly and support the preventative agenda.

15) The Children and Young People Partnership should draw up key principles for work with children, young people and parents in South Gloucestershire. These should include listening to the expressed needs of parents and considering the practical barriers that make it difficult for parents to attend services.
The Children and Young People Partnership is a partnership of all the main providers of services. The main aim of the partnership is to ensure that services work together well to improve the lives of children and young people.

16) The most popular aspects of parenting training should be highlighted when advertising general parenting courses.

17) Social aspects of meetings with parents should be recognised and time allowed within course programmes for parents to get to know each other and make friends if they wish.

18) The expectations and needs of parents who attend parenting training should be noted at the beginning of the course and the content should be relevant to the parents who attend. If the content does not sufficiently deal with issues relating to children with learning difficulties and those who are disabled, it may be necessary to offer tailor-made courses to respond to the needs of these families.

19) South Gloucestershire services should consider the ways to encourage mutual support for parents. This could include:

- Allowing time for parents to talk informally at parenting courses and workshops
- Offering funding or in-kind support for self-help groups; for example free meeting space or use of facilities
- Promoting opportunities for groups to meet other groups through organisations such as The Care Forum, CVS South Gloucestershire and specialist networking groups such as the Young Mums Umbrella Group
- Giving advice and information to those who are or wish to be engaged in parents’ groups
- Identifying priority areas for parents’ groups and putting in measures to ensure that groups can be set up and maintained in these geographical areas.

The South Gloucestershire Parenting Support Strategy Implementation Group is responsible for looking at the recommendations and deciding which ones should be put into practice and when this will happen. The group has members from health, education and social care who are responsible for working together to improve the support for parents in South Gloucestershire. The South Gloucestershire Parenting Commissioner and contact person for the group is Liz Crocker, Head of Severn Vale Locality, South Gloucestershire Council, Bowling Hill, Chipping Sodbury, BS37 6JX, 01454 865905, liz.crocker@southglos.gov.uk

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