



**Consultation response**  
**'Support for All: The Families and Relationships**  
**Green Paper'**

Submitted to HM Government

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## About Children England

Children England is the leading membership organisation for the children, young people and families' voluntary sector. With member organisations working in all parts of the country ranging from small local groups to the largest household names in children's charities, Children England is in a unique position to use the collective voice of the voluntary sector to achieve positive change for children. Children England provides capacity building, support and information to its members and the wide range of voluntary sector organisations working with children, young people and families. It does this by building active networks, promoting good practice, stimulating policy debate and ensuring that the issues that matter most to its members are taken up with decision makers.

Children England is committed to working alongside its members in the creation of a society where children and young people are valued, protected and listened to, their rights are realised and their families supported.

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## Introduction

Children England welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper*. Our members work on a daily basis with families of all types and forms, working to support them to live happy fulfilled lives and to empower them to take decisions for the benefit of their families. The recognition that policy and practice needs to shift away from a preoccupation with family structure to support which recognises a multiplicity of family forms is long-overdue.

Our members have the interests of the family at the heart of what they do, and through their work seek to provide strong family-friendly services. The voluntary and community sector has a strong history in putting families first, developing dynamic family-focused services that respond quickly to changing local need. Many Children England members deliver early intervention work to prevent problems escalating to crises, and work with the most disadvantaged to tackle some of the most intangible problems family poverty presents. Without these vital services, run by a thriving and dynamic voluntary and community sector, children, young people and families lose out.

We strongly agree that mainstream services need to continue to be remodelled to become family friendly. The emphasis in the paper on family form, rather than structure is welcome – as is the importance the paper places on the myriad roles that family members, extended family and friends play in supporting children, young people and families.

Our response draws on the experience of our members and focuses on the role of the voluntary and community sector in supporting families in all their forms. As such, our response focuses on the first three questions posed in the Green Paper:

1. What more can we do to help create a culture in which seeking help for relationship or parenting problems, or other family difficulties, is considered socially acceptable?
2. Which issues should be prioritised by Government in seeking to strengthen families and support family relationships in this country?
3. Which services need the most urgent development to make them truly family-friendly?

**1. What more can we do to help create a culture in which seeking help for relationship or parenting problems, or other family difficulties, is considered socially acceptable?**

1 Children England is pleased to see a key area of the green paper focuses on how to make it more acceptable for parents to seek help for their families. All too often families are put off seeking help from statutory services through fear of stigma, not being listened to or being judged. The voluntary and community sector often provides the vital services or links between voluntary and statutory services for families who are wary of seeking help. There are complex issues around help-seeking behaviour, which makes it paramount that all services are sensitive to the individual needs of families and are able to work in conjunction with and for families. Families need to be treated as partners in their support, where issues around information sharing, confidentiality and access are negotiated up front. As the Green Paper recognises, the voluntary sector is key to providing relationship support which families trust. An example of how to create a culture of trust between families and service providers is evidenced by the Home Start outreach service which supports nearly 34,000 families each year and where 25% of families self-refer.

**Home Start**

Offers parents a wide range of services and different approaches to choose from, which are negotiated up front from the beginning and which work around the needs of the family.

The support must be non-stigmatising, one way of achieving this is to employ the skills of people who have experienced difficulties themselves. Home Start does this through their 16,000 trained parent volunteers who act as peer-support. This enables Home-Start volunteers to be accepted into families' homes and allowed to help.

It is crucial that organisations work together to offer a range of joined up services. Health visitors work in close conjunction with Home-Start workers to enable support to be both tailored and holistic and to ensure all needs are met.

Early intervention is essential and the most cost effective approach. Services must be able and willing to act early, with tact and compassion.

Services must be available to all families but tailored to their individual needs. A universal, tailored support service like Home-Start's offers support across the social, ethnic and economic spectrum.

## 1.1 Reliance on information products

1.1.1 The Green Paper relies heavily throughout on recommendations that involve producing or enhancing websites, guides and pamphlets, including those signposting people to the kinds of help that may be available to them.

1.1.2 We support the need for families to have clear and accessible information about what is available to them and how services can help. We would urge caution, however, in any belief that such information products will, in themselves, achieve the kind of cultural change towards greater help-seeking that is aspired to.

1.1.3 Firstly, not all families have internet access or the confidence to use IT, although the numbers who have both are increasing. For some of the families in greatest need of support, written materials in general may be something they struggle to engage with, especially if their situation includes English being a new language to them, literacy problems or learning difficulties. Many voluntary sector services find they spend a lot of face-to-face time helping individuals to understand and navigate the kinds of services they may benefit from, and support to access them, not least as service configurations (ie exactly what types of support are available from which local services, and how to access them) can vary greatly from one area to the next. It may be that the oxygen of publicity, and being able to find information through the web, can help to decrease the feeling of being on one's own when experiencing problems, but there is not enough evidence to suggest that websites and leaflets are effective in solving problems. It is vital to recognise the importance of personal support being available to people who need help to effectively 'broker' the right package of support for them.

1.1.4 Secondly, there is great emphasis in the Green Paper on universal services as the primary provider of support, and as the gateway to more targeted services. The voluntary sector has been broadly supportive of this general model, as promoted through Every Child Matters. In reality, and as financial pressures on all services (public and third sector) begin to impact on service commissioning and the continued survival of non-commissioned services, there is a real need to address in much greater detail the appropriate points, and capacity demands, for different types of intervention along that continuum. For example, it will not be realistic to simply add more and more expectations of the kinds of support that should be available from schools and children's centres, without additional funding or staffing capacity, if in reality those agencies will need to refer families with needs they can't meet on to 'targeted' services. In turn, it is clear that targeted services (ie those meeting the needs of identifiable groups and/or requiring highly specialised professional skills) will be those under greatest pressure as money becomes tighter. The experience of our members is that as service demands increase, statutory 'specialist' agencies will tend to manage their caseloads by using increasingly high threshold criteria for referral, and it is often our members' services that

will 'fill the gap' between what universal services are able to provide on the one hand, and the criteria for 'high threshold' support on the other.

1.1.5 We do understand the dilemmas ahead, and we certainly advocate continued priority and investment in the earliest possible high quality support being provided to families. Our main concern is to emphasise that changes and capacity pressures in one part of the universal-targeted continuum have knock-on-impacts on other parts of the local service framework, whether deliberately commissioned for or not. This in turn has a major impact on the information available to families about what help they can expect from where.

## 1.2 Building trusted relationships

1.2.1 Crucial to the success of Home Start and other voluntary sector family-support services is the creation of long-term, trusted relationships between a family and a small number of support workers. Voluntary sector organisations have a strong history in providing trusted key workers who ensure that assessments, information gathering and visits to agencies are neither duplicated nor time wasting. It is only by building these long-term trusted relationships between families, support services and communities that we can normalise the seeking of support for family or relationship problems.

1.2.2 Changing the culture in relation to families seeking help needs to be based on an understanding of not only the distrust that some families can have of statutory services, but also a critical engagement with how and why people do seek help, and how professional practice can affect help-seeking. For example, a request for help from a parent that focuses on problems with their child's behaviour may mask other difficulties in the family which are part of, or even the cause of, the problem. It is also vital that professionals recognise any request for help as an important step, even where the issue or request may seem 'trivial' or a low priority. A first approach with a seemingly insignificant issue may be an individual testing the water for whether they feel safe to reveal more significant problems, and a good practitioner will use any approach for help as a basis for showing respect and encouraging wider exploration of the person's circumstances and needs. Some professionals, including those inexperienced in dealing with serious issues like child protection and domestic violence, for example, can be afraid of using such approaches as a chance to encourage greater disclosure, as they may be afraid of uncovering a situation they are unsure of being ready to respond to. This illustrates the importance of high quality, on-going practice training in uncovering and responding to 'specialist' needs for those professionals working in universal agencies.

### 1.3 Coordination

1.3.1 Co-ordinated support for families is also highlighted by the Home Start example as one of the most likely ways to effect change and build both resilience and capacity in families. Sure Start Children's Centres often run by voluntary organisations are another example of the success coordinated support for families, in conjunction with voluntary and community organisations and statutory partners can have. Through these partnerships, Children's Centres are capable of targeting highly disadvantaged children and families and have developed strategies for meeting the needs of these families early on. It is vital that Children's Centres continue to be the one-stop shop for families, where services remain tailored to meet the varying needs of families and are built and sustained in partnership with parents and local communities. The co-location of multi-agency staff is seen as a great strength of the Sure Start model. Where expertise and staff are shared there is a highly effective mechanism for early intervention in areas of high deprivation. Parents and carers become familiar with seeing professionals working together and find it easier to access a range of services regardless of whom they approach in the first instance. In addition to this, staff from other services can gain a real understanding of the roles and remits of differing professionals reducing the incidence of duplication and assisting with the compilation of comprehensive plans to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged families in a locality.

1.3.2 Voluntary sector run Sure Start centres build on the existing links the community has with the organisation, whilst bringing partners into the Centre to holistically support families. The value of these sector-run centres should not be under-valued and support needs to continue for the sector to engage in both running centres and programmes from within them. One example of how the sector can build on existing relationships with families, whilst coordinating services through Sure Start is below.

#### **Whitehaven Sure Start Children's Centre**

Whitehaven Surestart Children's Centre in Cumbria is run by the Howgill Family Centre which began over thirty years ago as a family support organisation working in the local community and was both an Early Excellence Centre and one of the Trailblazing Sure Start Local Programmes. This existing experience and rooting in the local community has enabled the Sure Start Centre to identify and respond more quickly to need than that of new start ups. This is because as an existing organisation Howgill was already well-respected in the local area and as such has a strong reputation, making it ideally-placed to reach the most disadvantaged families. Howgill currently delivers four centres in partnership with the Local Authority in Cumbria.

## 1.4 Sustaining strong family support services and growing more

In building on the successful programmes and services run by the voluntary and community sector to support families, we recommend that Government at both central and local levels ensures this good practice can continue and expand. We believe that only in championing such models of work, can we collectively create a positive culture around seeking help:

### 1.4.1 At the local level funders need to:

- Work in partnership with the voluntary sector, from the inception through to the delivery and evaluation of services.
- Fund for the longer-term to enable us to develop and maintain relationships with families that allow us to provide trusted, meaningful support.
- Ensure local voluntary sector representatives are involved in local strategic decision-making bodies, particularly Children's Trusts. This is to ensure best practice is circulated and to tap into the expertise and intelligence the sector has in working with families.
- Ensure commissioning processes, procurement exercises and performance monitoring are proportionate to the size of the tender on offer. This is vital to enable small, locally-based and trusted organisations to continue their support for some of the most hard-to-reach families.

### 1.4.2 At the national level Government should:

- Promote the positive benefits of seeking and accepting help for parents and their children.
- Recognise the values the voluntary sector brings: the values of a caring and compassionate society and how these are intrinsic to successful family support
- Continue to recognise the sector as a strategic ally as well as a crucial delivery partner.
- Send a clear message that seeking help for relationship or parenting problems is a positive action and can have huge benefits for children now and into their future.
- Continue to support vital infrastructure bodies which are able to translate national policy into local practice, provide crucial links to local statutory bodies and provide support to local organisations in providing high quality services to families.

- The Think Family model promoted by Government at a central level has gone some way to ensuring that the needs of families are built into and cut across the discrete activities and policy areas Government departments cover. However, more needs to be done at a local level to ingrain this way of thinking and delivering services.

## **2. Which issues should be prioritised by Government in seeking to strengthen families and support family relationships in this country?**

### 2.1 Volunteers and Self-Help

2.1.1 Investing in the capacity and motivation of people to voluntarily give their time to support families in their community, and to share experience and learning with each other through self-help groups and networks, is an essential element of a comprehensive strategy for families. Over-emphasis on fully professionalized services for families can itself contribute to the 'pathologising' of the need to seek help, and for many families and individuals, the knowledge that the help and advice they seek is coming from someone giving freely of their own time and experience can be valuable to them in itself. Similarly, family members who have experienced difficulties and found positive pathways through them, can have an invaluable perspective to offer others in similar circumstances.

2.1.2 We believe that investing in volunteer and self-help organisations offers both an essential way of contributing to real culture change about help-seeking, and a creative and cost-effective way of extending the reach and types of support available to families at a time when funding pressures are on everyone's minds. If the benefits and full potential of volunteering and self-help for families are to be maximised, their costs, implications and quality requirements also need to be recognised:

- volunteers need established projects and schemes to volunteer for, with skilled staff accountable for the volunteers' experience, deployment and supervision, proportionate to the volume of volunteers
- encouraging volunteers requires sustainable schemes to which they can offer their time, usually over periods of years, to receive and use their training, and to be able to build the on-going relationships with service users that most volunteers seek
- self-help groups require things like communication resources, access to premises and publicity to communicate their availability

- grants, as opposed to tendered contracts, and inclusion within collaborative approaches to some tenders, are essential as funding mechanisms to support volunteer activities and self-help groups – most groups and projects of this kind, by their nature, will not meet tendering requirements in their own right
- CVS's (Councils for Voluntary Service) and other local, regional and national infrastructure bodies for the coordination and support of voluntary community action, are essential resources to ensure the conditions for volunteering and self-help to thrive. We understand that the demand for volunteer opportunities has already increased significantly since the credit crunch, not least with the encouragement of volunteering as part of the approach to tackling unemployment - while the funding and capacity of such bodies that act as essential hubs to coordinate and support volunteer placements, themselves face cuts and further funding threats.

## 2.2 Parental support services

2.2.1 Parental support services should be seen as a universal service. Practitioners should be trained in accredited evidence-based , parenting programmes that support a co-produced approach such as the Nurturing Programme run by Family Links. They emphasise the importance of the selecting the most relevant programme based on the needs of the client group as well as the knowledge and experience of the practitioner. Parent support can be delivered whenever and wherever seems appropriate. A rolling programme of different kinds of parenting support should be available including that for new parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, parents of disabled children, parents of teenagers, parents of teenage parents, grandparents who parent their grandchildren. This way those experiencing difficulties will know that there will be something they can attend at a time and place that will suit them. It should be commonplace that a Children's Centre, a primary school and a secondary school are all community hubs where courses of all sorts run regularly that parents, grandparents and lone parents attend because they meet their needs. A 'polyclinic' run by the PCT or a library could also meet such a need.

### **Family Links – The Nurturing Programme**

The schools and family nurturing programme had been developed in the UK by voluntary organisation Family Links. The programme consists of two distinct but related strands:

- The parenting programme improves parents' confidence and skills, enabling them to maintain effective positive discipline while understanding their own children's emotional needs.
- The children's programme is a curriculum based course run by teachers in the classroom, offering personal, social, health and citizenship education.

The Parent's Nurturing Programme is about getting the best out of family life. The course provides parents with strategies based on four well-researched cornerstones of family emotional health - appropriate expectations, self awareness and self esteem, positive discipline and empathy. The course is not prescriptive but provides parents with choice and flexibility in developing their parenting skills. The programme offers a forum for learning, reflecting, sharing ideas and having fun in a supportive, relaxed and confidential environment. Parents enjoy the opportunity to reflect on their parenting practice, and get a lot out of the course for themselves as well as their family. The programme helps parents to understand how emotions influence actions and offers practical ways of guiding children to learn to handle both their feelings and their behaviour. It suggests ways of helping parents to feel good - promoting confidence and self-esteem in adults and children.

### **3. Which services need the most urgent development to make them truly family-friendly?**

3.1 Children England's members have suggested that almost all services need reform to be truly family friendly. This is not only to ensure that families access and take up services but also to help build resilience and well-being. Family friendly services are those designed *around the needs of the family* not around the needs of the service provider. Services need to prove by their actions that they are thinking about not only all potential family members but also all possible family structures. In thinking about services that need reform or development, it may be helpful to consider what makes a

service 'family-friendly'. The following are key aspects of what makes a family-friendly service.

- **Flexibility** – services need to be flexible, in terms of opening times, locality, facilities, and varied types of support. This is to make certain that families get the support they need, when they need it in places that are easy to access and welcoming. For example, many members cited the need for primary health services and access to childcare to be available to family members on evenings and weekends, reflecting the constraints of work, the unaffordable costs of taking time off work for many parents, and the prevalence of long hours and shift work patterns, particularly for many families in work but on low income.
- **Welcoming and child-friendly** – having a physical environment that will be welcoming and pleasant for children to spend time in along with their parents and carers, can make a critical difference to whether the parent comes into a service, or returns again. This may range from having colourful pictures and toys available, a dedicated space where children can play, right through to having crèche facilities where parents can leave their children in the care of staff while having meetings and appointments. Equally important will be the welcoming attitudes of staff to the presence of children in the service, even where it is an 'adult' service for the parent – some parents will be very sensitive to the feeling that the noise or presence of their child has been unwelcome, and avoid bringing them back again.
- **Participation** – family-friendly services often stem from a bottom up approach, where families are actively involved in shaping services. Strong participation in the design and delivery of services enables service providers and commissioners to learn from the lived experience of families highlighting what they need and want from a service. It also has the dual effect of empowering families.
- **Whole-family approach** – Services need to demonstrate they are thinking about a range of family members including mothers, fathers, carers, grandparents, siblings, pregnant women, babies, children, teenagers and young people. This is to better tailor support around the child or family in question whilst building on the skills and identifying more tacit needs amongst other family members. It is only by taking a holistic approach that tailored, wrap-around packages of full support can be successfully created. This is important not only for services that seek explicitly to offer help to support families, but can be critical in services (for example adult mental health or substance misuse services) where it will be important to ask whether the service user has family and caring responsibilities (for relatives of any age), and how that may affect both the problems they seek help with, and their requirements for accessing the service.
- **Fathers and male carers** – we recognise and are supportive of the emphasis the Green Paper places on the importance of fathers and male carers. Fathers and male carers can have different needs and interact with services in different

ways. Family-friendly services respond to this by offering different ways of engagement without singling out fathers or male carers for 'special treatment', which although well-intentioned can make them feel uncomfortable or over-scrutinised. Family-friendly services are able to promote a positive and involved view of fatherhood and services support their active engagement.

- **Considerate of difference and diversity** – Missing from the Green Paper is an acknowledgement of the challenge cultural difference can sometimes present in supporting families. Different cultures and groups can have different views on what is appropriate for men and women in terms of family roles, and it is important for services to ensure they cater for any particular needs of discrete cultural groups. It is important to make a universal offer and encouragement of support without discrimination, but it can in some cases be important to consider targeted sessions for different groups, including consideration of 'women only' services and timeslots. One of our members reported her experiences with women from war-affected countries as having no sense of 'self-efficacy' because they have fled from countries that were ruled by men in every sense. It may be that ESOL classes (with crèches) are a prior condition for any parenting support classes to be effective. Parenting support needs to be universal provision, but it is the case that for it to work it can need fine tuning to the needs and interests, prior experiences, age, languages spoken and many other variables.
- **Outreach** –Running services from various local venues like schools and community centres are often utilised to make the most of existing networks and also benefit from embedding families within their local communities. Effective outreach can be done – for example one of Norwood's centres has succeeded in engaging with the Orthodox Jewish Community. Concern is often felt that services do not meet the needs of those with mental health problems, with substance misuse issues, with speech and language problems etc. Extra effort and commitment –including home visiting- are needed to ensure those so affected have the opportunity to engage with services

#### **4 Final points – some notes of caution and gaps**

As stated at the outset, Children England broadly welcomes the approach and philosophy of the Green Paper. In conclusion, however, we would want to signal a few notes of caution, and to highlight some gaps we perceive in the paper, that do not fall easily within the questions offered.

##### 4.1 Families and the Economy

4.1.1 It is of course essential that the Green Paper has addressed the many ways in which family life can be constrained and pressurised by the world of work and by money struggles, and has sought to outline measures to establish a balance that favours families better. We believe, however, that a stronger case for mutual interdependence between business, employment and families needs to be articulated. Families are the

primary support structure enabling employers to be able to have, and to rely upon, the employees they need to deliver their business – and a smart employer will understand that being supportive of the kind of conditions and work patterns that will promote personal balance and happiness at home is, in fact, in their business interests too.

#### 4.2 Extending family-proofing more broadly

4.2.1 Some of the areas of society and public life that require a much greater emphasis on family are left out of the Green Paper, but are critical to the conditions affecting families. In particular we would highlight Housing, Planning and Environmental policy areas as being some of those that can have a profound and decisive impact, (for good or for bad) on families. If seeking a truly family-centred society, the Green Paper needs to be even more ambitious about its reach.

#### 4.3 Early Years, yes – but what about young people?

4.3.1 We very much support the view that support for families in the early years of children's development is both essential in the present, and influential on family resilience in the longer term. We do feel, however, that the challenges and needs of young people and their families are under-addressed – both in terms of existing family-focused services in communities, and within the recommendations and analysis of this Green Paper. We can, as a society, be too keen to view a young person in increasing isolation from their family as they grow older, but for many families, it is precisely around this time that new and challenging needs for whole-family support and advice can arise.

#### 4.4 Family is important, but we must remain balanced

4.4.1 It is important, in promoting the cultural shift towards greater family awareness and inclusiveness, that we avoid the risk of locating the cause (and potentially blame) for all individual problems at the family door. For many children and parents, the stresses and problems they can come to experience may be firmly located in events and issues happening 'outside' the family, for example when a child is being bullied at school, and will require actions to address the source of those problems. An automatic recourse to focussing on family practices and capacity in such circumstances may in fact be experienced as intrusive and inappropriate.

4.4.2 Equally there can be many important situations in which a child or adult seeks personal help explicitly without reference to, and in confidence from, their family, and it will be important to ensure the right balance between recognition of the significance of family for all of us on the one hand, and the respect for an individual who seeks to be treated and helped on their own terms on the other. For many people growing up in small rural communities, for example, it can be a real struggle to offer meaningful assurances of truly confidential support when all the staff and volunteers of a service are likely to come from the same community or surrounding areas, and may already know that person's wider family on a personal basis.

#### 4.5 Family can sometimes be the problem

4.5 Closely related, but requiring distinct attention, is the fact that for some people – child and adult – their family can be precisely the situation, and risk to their life and safety, that they require support to escape. Whether domestic violence from one partner to another, the abuse of children, or very particular and sensitive issues like forced marriage, there are some very critical situations that require services to support people who feel the need to find safety away from their family. In placing emphasis on spreading family-centredness across the public sphere, it is vital that we make sure that messages and offers of ‘family-based’ services and support do not deter those who may need assurances of protection from their family.

We welcome the opportunity to feed back our response to this Green Paper, and welcome any queries or further dialogue about the issues and examples highlighted here.