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SEN Magazine Ltd. Chapel House, Shawbridge Street, Clitheroe, BB7 1LY
Tel: 01200 409800 Fax: 01200 409809 Email: editor@senmagazine.co.uk



Who can you turn to?

Trizia Wells, of Calderdale Parent Partnership Service, provides the low down on a vital source of advice and support for parents

Parent partnership services (PPSs) are statutory organisations, funded by the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), offering impartial information and confidential, practical support to parents and carers of children and young people with SEN. PPSs have to ensure that service users' views inform and influence local SEN policy and practice. They also have to recruit volunteers as Independent Parent Supporters (IPS), be flexible and respond to local needs, offer training to parents and schools and collaborate with local authority (LA) officers and other agencies, including the voluntary sector. The LA has to inform parents

about their local PPS, for example, via school SENCOs and LA officers.

In a nutshell, the aim of PPSs is to empower parents and enable them to make appropriate and informed decisions. It is sometimes said that parent partnerships' fundamental role is to put themselves out of a job!

Because the provision of PPSs is mandatory, there is one in every local authority. However, the ways in which they operate vary. Some are in-house, some provided externally by, for example, a charity or other voluntary organisation, and some services are a mixture of the two. Some are home-based, a great many part-time and others have seen

their role grow to include other statutory provision, such as choice advisers. All PPSs remain the statutory responsibility of the LA while remaining at arms' length from it.

The underlying principle of impartiality is vital if parents are to have full confidence in PPSs. Exemplifications for PPSs are found in the SEN Code of Practice, published by the then Department for Education and Skills in 2001. This, very readable, document is invaluable to LAs, education settings, health and social services workers and to parents. In ten colour-coded sections, including one on working with parents, the Code sets out the principles, legislation, rights and

"...The aim of PPSs is to empower parents and enable them to make appropriate and informed decisions."

responsibilities which all these agencies have a statutory duty to regard. The Code was ratified as "clear and workable, offering sound advice ..." by the recent Lamb Inquiry which looked into effective ways of increasing parental confidence in the SEN system.

In 2007 a guide for parents and carers was published by the DCSF, and it was revised this year. The guide simplifies the jargon and processes surrounding SEN, including a flowchart of the timetable for assessment as well as contact details for many voluntary agencies.

Problems can arise in the implementation of the Code, which is often where PPSs step in. Good information and communication make a huge difference to parental participation and satisfaction. PPSs can explain and support parents at each step, deciphering jargon, helping to write parental contributions and complete forms, accompanying parents at meetings, liaising with professionals and, where necessary, helping parents to appeal against decisions made by the LA.

Minimum standards also require PPSs to work with the LA and other agencies to promote good relationships with parents. By approaching the problem of good communication and information from both ends, PPSs can help them to meet in the middle. This is done in various ways; resources differ and some PPSs are able to run a dedicated telephone helpline outside office hours, while others lack the capacity to support parents at meetings. As a result, PPSs are becoming increasingly flexible, making the most of local circumstances and expertise.

Here are just some examples of the work done by PPSs:



Essex Parent Partnership covers a wide geographical area and runs regular events supporting everyone involved at the main points of educational transition. Agencies, parents and children participate in transition conferences for fourteen+, where they gain relevant information and voice concerns. Four area offices organise conferences with other agencies to support parents of pre-school and year 5 children, as well as coffee mornings for parents embarking on the statutory assessment process. Termly workshops for parents focus on practical aspects, such as behaviour management, which Janet Hill, Essex PPS Manager says "always receive excellent feedback and indeed parents travel across the county for them."

Bob Wilson is the Assistant Parent Partnership Officer for the **Cambridgeshire Parent Partnership Service**, which runs regular transition events for children moving to secondary school. Termly roadshows cover specific topics, such as dyspraxia, where parents and schools benefit from improved knowledge and understanding.

Calderdale PPS utilises its skills to provide counselling to parents of children with special needs, and training in peer massage for schools. The counselling is free, but a reasonable charge is made for the peer massage training, which has generated additional income. The Service Manager, Joanne Grenfell, represents parents alongside a wide variety of services on the Moderating Panel.

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Worcestershire Parent Partnership has been proactive in engaging a difficult to reach group, fathers in prison. Sue Brooke, the service manager, explains the two-fold benefits: "... fathers who are in prison feel they can still play an active role in their child's life even though they are not with them, it also helps mothers to feel less isolated, and helps to engage a hard to reach and sometimes forgotten group." Working with prison staff, the service provides information and practical support to prisoners and their families. Prison librarians display leaflets about the service and make referrals to PPS staff, who also support individual parents during family time visits or on the wing. The service also attends fortnightly events where they talk generally about their work. One of the fathers wrote: "I'm writing to you ... to say thanks very much for all your time and energy that you give to our family time visit. Your enthusiasm ... is appreciated by all prisoners and our families."



Further information

If you would like to find out about the services offered by your local parent partnership service, you can contact them via the National Parent Partnership Network on **020 7843 6058** or visit the website at: www.parentpartnership.org.uk

PPS rely on volunteer IPS to help support their work in different ways. IPS may be retired SENCOs, LA officers or parents, and PPS experience can be valuable in acquiring paid employment. Bridget Mork, of **Leeds Parent Partnership**, explains that the service recruits volunteers wherever they go, offering full training and work shadowing. The PPS has over 40 volunteers, many of whom are students from the Beckett Park Law School. They gain valuable experience by supporting parents at admissions appeals or governors' hearings on exclusions.



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Next steps for Bercow

James Law outlines the research initiatives that have grown out of the Bercow Report on services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs

The Bercow Review¹ included a research strand^{2,3} and, together with the subsequent Better Communication Action Plan⁴, made a number of specific proposals. These included the appointment of a Communication Champion, the setting up of the Communication Council and the development of sixteen commissioning pathfinders for services for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)⁵. A programme of research was also commissioned to support the development of these activities and this was awarded in June 2009 to a team of four researchers with long-standing experience in the field: Professor Geoff Lindsay (University of Warwick), Professor Julie Dockrell (Institute of Education, University of London), Professor James Law (Newcastle University) and Professor Sue Roulstone (University of the West of England).

The program is called the Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) and will run from 2009 to 2012, with a potential extension through to 2014. The research team is supported by four other academics, two economists and two psychologists, and it is also anticipated that a wide range of other groups of practitioners and service providers will become involved in the programme as it develops.

While it is anticipated that addition research strands will emerge as the programme progresses, the BCRP will, in the first year, focus on five key areas of study:

- a review of best practice, making the best published research available, complemented by evidence from

pathfinder sites, in the first instance, and other providers of services for children with SLCN. Local authorities and primary care trusts will be asked to report on current practice and on the ways in which their services are delivered and how they have been evaluated. This information will then be made available to service providers, commissioners and practitioners alike through the BCRP website

- the analysis of national educational data sets, notably the National Pupil Database, identifying school census patterns of prevalence and outcomes for pupils with SLCN across local authorities
- the identification of a set of economic criteria for judging the value of intervention for children with SLCN
- a cross sequential prospective study comparing change in children with specific language impairment and autistic spectrum disorder for children between ages five to fourteen
- an investigation of the views of the stakeholders themselves. This will include the in-depth analysis of a series of focus groups of service users, children with SLCN and their parents, those providing services and those supporting provision through professional bodies and the voluntary sector.

The second and subsequent years of the BCRP will be shaped by the continuation to some of the projects in year one and by new projects agreed by the research team and the programme steering group. It is important to retain this flexibility to allow the team to respond to the evidence as it develops. **5**

Footnotes and further information

1: Bercow, J. (2008). *The Bercow Report: A review of services for children and young people (0-19) with speech, language and communication needs*. Nottingham: DCSF. www.dcsf.gov.uk/bercowreview

2: Lindsay, G., Desforges, M., Dockrell, J., Law, J., Peacey, N. and Beecham, J. (2008). *The effective and efficient use of resources in services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs*. DCSF-RW053. Nottingham: DCSF. www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW053.pdf

3: Lindsay, G., Dockrell, J., Desforges, M. & Peacey, N. (in press) *Meeting the needs of children with speech, language and communication difficulties*. International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders.

4: Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Better communication: Improving services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs*. DCSF: Nottingham.

5: www.dcsf.gov.uk/slcnaaction/pathfinders.shtml

Further information will become available on the programme website: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/projects/current/slcn