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# Review of parenting support for Flying Start: Executive Summary



# **Review of parenting for Flying Start: Executive Summary**

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**York Consulting  
Sally Kendall**

**Interface Associates  
Julia Moller**

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Chris Roberts

Knowledge and Analytical Services

Welsh Government

Cathays Park Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

Tel: 029 2082 6543

Email: [chris.roberts@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:chris.roberts@wales.gsi.gov.uk)

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1. In December 2011, Interface Associates and York Consulting were commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a 'Review of Parenting Support for Flying Start'. The review was conducted between January and March 2012.
2. The Flying Start programme was launched by the Welsh Government in 2006/07 as a pilot with the aim "*to make a decisive difference to the life chances of children aged under four in the areas in which it runs*". It provides the following entitlements: Enhanced Health Visiting Support; Childcare; Parenting Support; and Language and Play (LAP) programmes. The programme is prescriptive in terms of the scale and quality of the entitlements, but allows for local flexibility and expects local accountability. Flying Start sits alongside support offered by other programmes, such as Families First, Communities First and Integrated Family Support Services (IFSS). The aim is that these programmes form seamless support that meets the needs of children and their families as soon as they are identified. There is an expectation that these programmes should be interlinked and part of the overall strategy to tackle child poverty.

### **Background**

3. Parenting support was included as a specific entitlement within Flying Start because the evidence shows that warm and supportive parenting facilitates the development of strong and secure relationships and that parenting which is harsh and neglectful increases the risks of poor outcomes for children. The definition of parenting support used within the Flying Start guidance is focused on "*programmes providing support and skills training for parents whose aim is to promote children's wellbeing by enhancing protective factors and reducing their exposure to risk*". The parenting entitlement within Flying Start includes informal, formal and intensive support.
4. The parenting programmes delivered as part of Flying Start were informed by the Communities that Care Review undertaken in 2006. Current Flying Start guidance categorises parenting programmes as follows:

- **Group A:** Programmes were eligible for Flying Start funding due to strong evidence of improved outcomes for children when used with the Flying Start age group. These programmes were already in use in Wales with opportunities for training and peer support.
- **Group B:** Programmes could be funded if they filled a gap in current service delivery and there were no local examples of Group A to build on. These were programmes where their effectiveness had been proven in rigorous evaluation studies but they were not being delivered in Wales.
- **Group C:** Programmes were those where there was insufficient evidence from rigorous evaluation studies, but there was established practice and experience in Wales. They were not eligible for Flying Start funding unless they were part of a jointly funded research programme to evaluate their effectiveness using controlled research designs and there were already experienced trainers and materials available.

### **Objectives of the Review and Methods**

5. This current review reflects the Welsh Government's recognition that there was a need to review the current Flying Start guidance to ensure that it was still fit for purpose. The objectives of the review were to:
  - **refresh the evidence base on informal and formal parenting support** and summarise the implications for policy and practice, relating this to current activity within Flying Start;
  - **review the current parenting entitlement in Flying Start**, identify barriers, enablers and best practice in delivery;
  - **support the future development of the programme**, identify gaps in evidence and provide suggestions on how to improve the evidence base on the effectiveness and impact of these interventions in Flying Start.
6. As part of the review the research team undertook:
  - a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) of published and academic literature focused on support for 0-4 year olds and their families, from 2006 onwards;
  - telephone consultations with:

- Flying Start Coordinators and managers across the 22 Welsh local authorities;
  - representatives from national, voluntary sector stakeholders involved in parenting support.
7. It is important to note the limitations of this review. This was not an in-depth analysis of parenting support within Flying Start and practice was not observed or evaluated.

### **Review of the current evidence base**

8. The parenting support identified (both in consultations and across the literature) can be categorised according to:
- **universal programmes of support** (including informal support) available for all parents and children irrespective of risk (which may include some targeting);
  - **targeted and specialist programmes of support** for parents/children with identified additional needs/risk factors.
9. Universal interventions are important because they offer opportunities to make parenting support accessible to as wide a population as possible, thereby widening the likely benefits. They also minimise the stigma which influences the take up of targeted support and provide opportunities for the identification of high risk families. Flying Start clearly has an important role to play in delivering support at this level and in providing universal support based on both need and entitlement.
10. The support identified was further divided into three thematic areas:
- **perinatal support and support in the early years:** focused on universal, generally health-led approaches and programmes centred on parental attunement and/or attachment with babies and young children, e.g. the Neonatal Behavioural Assessment Scale (NBAS), the Newborn Behavioural Observations Systems Training (NBO) and the Solihull Approach;

- **early intervention approaches to supporting vulnerable parents:** focused on developing early parenting capacities, bonding, and establishing effective parenting strategies, e.g. the Community Mothers Programme (CMP) and Family Nurse Partnerships (FNP);
  - **positive parenting:** programmes to support parent/child relationships and the management of children's behaviour, e.g. the Family Links Nurturing Programme (FLNP) and the Incredible Years (IY) Parenting Programmes.
11. Our review provided the following conclusions regarding the provision of these programmes:

- **Perinatal Support and Support in the Early Years:** although the evidence base was not particularly robust, evidence from the review suggests that baby massage is a suitable low cost intervention for low risk families. The review also highlighted the need for further research to explore the particular benefits of engaging fathers in such support. The benefits of using developmental guidance such as the NBAS were identified, but also the need to ensure that such approaches are embedded within longer-term intervention, particularly for higher risk parents. The evaluation of the Solihull Approach provided some promising evidence, but it also identified a number of issues which have implications for all programmes delivered via Flying Start, namely the need: for longer-term follow-up to see whether changes in outcomes are maintained; to analyse demographic data to identify the variables which influence how parents respond to programmes; the reasons why they drop out or do not engage with support; and to ensure that programmes are suitable for the parents recruited on to them.
- **Early intervention approaches to supporting vulnerable parents:** the benefits of some community based home visiting programmes were identified, e.g. the Community Mothers Programme. However, less positive evaluations of other home visiting programmes highlighted the importance of implementing a structured approach and ensuring deliverers are appropriately trained and supported. The value of using multi-component, long term nurse home visiting programmes for young, vulnerable, first time parents was evidenced through the FNP programme.

Findings from evaluation of this programme in the US provides important learning in relation to the delivery of such approaches and both endorse and reinforce the approaches undertaken by the enhanced health visiting role within Flying Start partnerships.

- **Positive Parenting:** at the targeted level, the evidence base for Parents Plus Early Years Programme (PPEY) was robust and showed improved outcomes for both parents and children. The evaluation of the Incredible Years BASIC Programme undertaken in Wales supports its continued use with parents with children at risk of conduct disorder. However, it is critical that the right parents are engaged in the programme in order to minimise drop out and maximise engagement and there is a need to review longer-term outcomes. At the universal level, findings from the randomised controlled trial (RCT) undertaken for 1-2-3 Magic appeared promising but further research is required. With regards to the FLNP, previous evaluations showed a wide range of benefits. While the recent FLNP study in south Wales identified some positive outcomes, they were not statistically significant and therefore were inconclusive. The evaluation raised issues concerning the challenges of using a RCT to evaluate a universal programme already available in areas which had existing enhanced levels of parenting support, although this issue is the subject of ongoing debate.

### **Assessing Current Delivery**

12. Telephone consultations conducted as part of the review were used to explore why partnerships have developed their offer in different ways; to gather consultees' views on the current programme guidance; how this has been used in decision making by local partnerships; and how they would like it to develop. The consultations also focused on the strategic development of parenting support and the implementation of parenting programmes.

### **Strategic Development of Parenting Support**

13. The review highlighted the need for the Welsh Government to clearly communicate the expectations of parenting support in improving the outcomes



for families in Flying Start areas. Findings from the consultations suggest the Flying Start guidance could set out the overarching strategic priorities and desired population outcome indicators for parents and families, as well as indicators of outcomes for children, to measure the contribution of parenting support.

14. In some Flying Start areas there was a comprehensive and cohesive approach to delivering parent support services through alignment with local plans and partnerships. In others, a lack of strong governance arrangements for the delivery of parenting and family support in the local area highlighted the need to ensure strategic and operational alignment of the Flying Start parenting offer with local authority (LA) plans and other relevant strategies and initiatives. Such an approach would enable each Flying Start partnership to define outcomes at the local level aligned to LA outcomes in order to monitor and manage performance.
15. Links with programmes such as Families First and Integrated Family Support Services varied across areas, with some demonstrating strong and effective links and others seeking clarity on the partnership approaches. Information and referral routes need to exist between universal and more targeted and specialist services, both within Flying Start, as well as with other agencies. Adopting a multi-agency approach rather than a single agency referral route for the identification and assessment of parenting and family support needs of vulnerable groups ensures support is better targeted and is family focused.

### **Key Features of the Flying Start Parenting Offer**

16. Targeted, evidence based programmes approved in the Flying Start Guidance are used across the Flying Start Partnership. The Incredible Years Parenting Programme was the most widely used Category A Programme. The NBAS and NBO (Brazelton Approaches) were the only Category B Programmes currently being delivered in a small number of Flying Start areas. There was variation in the level of parenting provision on offer, with some partnerships offering a wide range of programmes. FLNP was the most popular Category C Programme and other programmes such as The Solihull Approach were also delivered.

Partnerships were also delivering a range of informal support programmes, including Baby Massage, Stay and Play, and breastfeeding and weaning clubs.

### **Parental Engagement and Retention**

17. Informal programmes were used by partnerships as a successful mechanism to engage parents in support. However, data collected from the partnerships revealed that a number still found it difficult to engage and retain particular groups, such as fathers, teenage parents and black and minority ethnic parents (BME), reflecting findings elsewhere. However, partnerships were addressing these issues through a range of strategies and approaches including: employing dads' workers; using interpreters; employing specialist young parent midwives; using local/familiar venues; and offering courses in evenings and at the weekends.
18. A number of partnerships offered specialist programmes for other vulnerable groups, such as the Earlybird programme for parents with an autistic child, and specific domestic violence programmes but the data for these was not reflected as part of the parenting offer.

### **Workforce Development**

19. In all Flying Start partnerships workforce development was seen as key to effective delivery. This consisted of training in specific programmes and the underlying philosophy of parenting principles and practice. Where both of these elements were delivered across the workforce this led to clear assessments and referral pathways and effective integrated service delivery.

### **Variation in Delivery**

20. The review highlighted variation in parenting support across the 22 Flying Start partnerships, both in terms of offer and practice. Although a challenge, the variation also reflected Flying Start partnerships developing services tailored to meet the needs of local communities. The interim evaluation published in 2010 questioned "*should the variation observed in the scale of the parenting entitlement across partnerships be reduced by specifying minimum levels of provision?*" Opinion of the Flying Start teams was fairly evenly split as to

whether minimum levels of provision should be set out in the guidance between a straight yes, a yes with some local considerations, to a no, it had to be decided locally.

21. We would recommend Flying Start partnerships, in partnership with the Welsh Government and their local partners, set minimum outcome indicators at the local level rather than minimum levels of provision. These indicators could include school readiness, a reduction in referrals to speech and language therapy and a reduction in referrals to specialist services such as social care.

### **Building the Evidence Base**

22. The findings from this review suggest that there is still a lack of a robust evidence base for parenting programmes in the UK, particularly at the universal level of delivery and in the use of RCTs. However, the review also identified the challenges in applying such approaches to universal programmes of support and that debate on this issue continues. The review highlighted the issue of over-reliance on RCTs for evidencing impact, particularly in relation to the types of universal/preventative programmes considered here and the need to consider various forms of evidence in the decision making process.
23. There is a need to improve the evidence base at the local level, particularly in relation to knowing what the 'active ingredients' of parenting programmes are, which programmes work for which types of parents and which parents drop out, or fail to engage (and the reasons why), as well as the need to evidence longer term benefits. The review identified a number of issues which have implications for all parenting programmes delivered via Flying Start and will help to build the evidence base, including the need for longer-term monitoring of outcomes to see whether positive outcomes are maintained; more robust monitoring of the engagement and retention of parents on programmes; and addressing the lack of evaluation evidence from informal programmes of support.
24. Partnerships need to systematically analyse their data to inform service delivery (a number are already implementing such an approach). This needs to be undertaken at three levels:
  - at the individual level: undertaking individual assessments of progress;

- at the programme level: analysis of impact within a programme of support;
- at the service level: incorporating evidence to allow comparison of outcomes across different programmes of support.

## **Conclusions**

### **Objective 1: To refresh the evidence base on informal and formal parenting support and summarise the implications for policy and practice, relating this to current activity within Flying Start.**

25. Overall, the review found little recently published evidence of new parenting programmes that have been able to provide robust evidence that they improve outcomes for families with children aged 0-4, particularly at the universal/informal level. What was identified tended to be more at the targeted or specialist level, such as the Parents Plus Early Years Programme and the Family Nurse Partnership, or was firming up evidence on existing programmes such as FLNP and the Incredible Years.
26. The review highlighted the ongoing debate around the benefits and challenges of undertaking RCTs linked to universal/preventative programmes of support (e.g. FLNP). The challenges in demonstrating the effectiveness of universal/preventative support should be taken into consideration when making decisions on what should be funded. It seems pragmatic to consider the available evidence, whether it is good enough (i.e. given the constraints of 'real world' situations) and balance this with the relative costs of delivery and the potential for additional positive (and negative) outcomes.
27. We would suggest that there continues to be a need to widen the base of recommended programmes within Flying Start and to continue to review ongoing research in this area. This could be developed through support for evaluation locally, sharing of common approaches, and using and building on collaboration with academic partners.
28. Most of the Flying Start partnerships were delivering programmes with a robust evidence base. The Incredible Years Parenting Programme was the most widely used programme and comprehensive training and ongoing support was available for practitioners. There were also close links with Bangor University

which had enabled Flying Start areas to support the piloting and development of new programmes, e.g. the Incredible Years Toddler Programme. Incredible Years will clearly continue to be a significant element of Flying Start delivery.

29. The Solihull Approach had been introduced in a number of Flying Start partnership areas and the review highlighted that this programme can deliver positive outcomes. Whilst a RCT has not been undertaken, the review highlighted the importance of looking at other evidence of effectiveness.
30. FLNP was delivered in a number of Flying Start Partnerships where staff report positively on its effectiveness. The review highlighted the recent RCT and inconclusive results, but, like the Solihull Approach, there was other evidence of positive outcomes and this needs to be part of the consideration around which programmes are delivered.
31. Programmes identified by the review that focused on developing positive parenting with some evidence of improvements in child outcomes through RCTs included the Parents Plus Early Years and 1-2-3 Magic. Neither of these were currently delivered in the Flying Start areas and consideration should be given as to whether these should be trialled. There may be some overlap between Parents Plus Early Years which focuses on speech and language with the Language and Play programme. 1-2-3 Magic offers a short universal intervention to managing behaviour and would respond to the need identified by some partnerships to have access to shorter programmes, which could improve parental engagement and retention.
32. Findings from community based home visiting programmes and the use of paraprofessionals to provide parents with support provided mixed evidence of improved outcomes. However, the evidence from both the Community Mothers Programme and the Family Nurse Partnership (for vulnerable first time mothers) suggest that both are worthy of further consideration. Findings from the UK evaluation of the Family Nurse Partnership programme should be looked at once published.
33. Baby massage was identified through the review as an appropriate intervention for low risk families and a number of Flying Start areas found it particularly

useful to engage fathers. It was delivered by a large number of partnerships that included it as part of their informal support offer.

**Objective 2: To review the current parenting entitlement and offer, identify barriers, enablers and best practice in delivery.**

34. The review identified a number of examples of good practice across many Flying Start Partnerships, including services designed around the needs of parents; the development of Action Learning Sets to share learning and best practice across authorities; and the use of a range of strategies to improve engagement and access, such as the use of a mobile crèche and the employment of a male dad's worker.
  
35. The delivery of the Flying Start parenting entitlement across the partnerships was influenced by local conditions and structures. In many LAs the parenting offer was well developed and integrated within a continuum of support with partners, in others there was more fragmentation and a less integrated offer. The consultations with Flying Start partnerships identified a number of enablers and barriers to delivering an effective and enhanced parenting offer.
  
36. Enablers focused on:
  - providing a coordinated approach to delivering parenting with other partners and agencies, based on a local needs analysis;
  - providing a well designed and developed Flying Start offer, with clarity on the outcomes that the parenting support was contributing towards;
  - having strong governance arrangements closely linked with Local Authority plans;
  - ensuring that evaluation and monitoring of parenting support services is undertaken to inform future planning and redesign;
  - providing integrated services for children, young people and their families, driven and championed by the local children and young people's board/partnerships;

- having a Parenting Champion at a senior and strategic level;
- improving skills and knowledge through joint training, co-working and co-location. Through better communication, shared approaches to assessment and managing risk, services were seen as responsive to local needs, improving engagement of families and maximising outcomes for children;
- workforce development that included an understanding of the underlying principles of work with parents, not just training in parenting programmes;
- providing a highly motivated workforce, delivering creative solutions to local challenges.

**37. Barriers focused on:**

- the challenge of demonstrating impact and outcomes in a coherent way across services;
- a lack of accessible venues and high costs of transport and childcare/crèche facilities;
- the challenge of engaging some more difficult to reach groups such as fathers, teenage parents, black and minority ethnic groups.

**Objective 3: To support the future development of the programme, identify gaps in evidence and provide suggestions on how to improve the evidence base on the effectiveness and impact of these interventions in Flying Start.**

38. The review of the literature highlighted the challenges in undertaking research to evidence the impact of parenting programmes. The issues identified have implications for parenting programmes delivered via Flying Start which will help to build the evidence base, namely:

- the need for longer term monitoring of outcomes to see whether positive changes are maintained. Following up parents post-intervention will have time and cost implications. The chaotic and transient nature of some families' lives would make longer term follow up impossible and it would not be practical for every programme. However, longer term monitoring of outcomes would be beneficial in order to further develop the local evidence base;
- using a triangulated approach to monitoring and evaluation, building on parent self-report to provide an independent assessment of impact and improvement in outcomes;
- better analysis of demographic data to identify the variables which influence how parents respond to programmes and how different parents respond to different programmes;
- more robust monitoring of the engagement and retention of parents on different programmes, particularly the reasons why parents drop out or do not engage with support. Where possible, this could be undertaken via follow-ups with referring agencies/services. Services need to know which parents are not engaging /dropping out and gather the views of those who do not engage to develop further learning, as well as ensuring that programmes are suitable for the parents recruited on to them;
- to better understand the needs of vulnerable or under-represented groups of parents through careful targeting so that appropriate engagement approaches are developed, as well as evaluated;
- the lack of evaluation evidence from informal programmes of support also needs to be addressed with suitable outcome indicators identified for the delivery of all informal support, such as whether participants go on to access additional programmes of support or the uptake of formal parenting programmes by vulnerable or hard to reach parents. It would also be beneficial to further explore the suitability of using tools such as SOUL (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) to measure soft outcomes;



- the informal programmes offered by partnerships should be reviewed to ensure that services are clear which informal programmes facilitate parental engagement in more formal parenting programmes.
39. Partnerships need to systematically analyse their data to inform service delivery (a number were already implementing such an approach). This needs to be undertaken at three levels:
- at the individual level: undertaking individual assessments of progress;
  - at the programme level: analysis of impact within a programme of support;
  - at the service level: incorporating evidence to allow comparison of outcomes across different programmes of support.

## **Recommendations**

*Recommendation 1:* While there was considerable consensus around the need to give more prominence and value to informal support within Flying Start, the current guidance does not include any informal programmes. This might reflect, in part, the lack of robust evidence for informal programmes. We recommend that the guidance could be extended to include baby massage, which was seen as a suitable intervention for low risk families.

*Recommendation 2:* In order to strengthen the evidence base for informal support, we recommend that suitable outcome indicators are identified for the delivery of informal support. A parenting self-report model such as TOPSE (Tool to measure Parenting Self Efficacy) or 'My World' could be used.

*Recommendation 3:* It would be advantageous for Flying Start partnerships to name a Parenting Champion operating at a senior level who can promote parenting support and engage partners at a strategic level ensuring that services are delivered to meet need and achieve outcomes.

*Recommendation 4:* We recommend that the parenting offer be strengthened in the new guidance and that there is a parenting strand within LAs' strategic plans, which includes a local needs assessment.

*Recommendation 5:* We would recommend the Flying Start partnerships, in conjunction with other services and initiatives, set and agree minimum local

outcome indicators rather than minimum levels of provision, to ensure better alignment and measurement of impact.