

# Working Together to Support Parents with a learning Disability

*A Joint Agency Protocol for  
Cornwall.*

# Background

- The Learning Disability Partnership Board requested adult and children's services to review and improve arrangements for supporting parents with learning disabilities.
- In 2010 a working group of a range of representatives from health, voluntary and social care began work on the protocol. Completed and launched by 2014.

# National Context

- While the exact numbers of disabled parents is not known the DoH estimates that there are between 1.2 and 4 million parents who could be included in this category .
- In keeping with National Guidance and Legislation (Human Rights Act, 1988, Valuing People 2001, 2009) adults with a learning disability have the right to family life and to become parents and are also entitled to additional support in their parenting role.
- According to "Valuing People" (DoH, 2001) adults with learning disabilities are amongst the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups in Britain today
- Parents with learning disabilities are often multiply disadvantaged and data suggests these families experience very significant levels of health and social inequality compared to other families.

# The National Context - contd

- There is an over-representation of parents with learning disabilities in care proceedings – around 50% of children are removed from their parents (Booth et al, 2005).
- One in six children that are subject to care proceedings have at least one parent with learning difficulties (almost one in four if parents with borderline learning difficulties are included).  
McConnell 2011.
- These figures have led to lots of good, proactive guidance for services for parents with learning disabilities.

# Issues that Face Parents with Learning Disabilities

- Multiple disadvantages
- Deficiency perspective – focus on deficits rather than abilities, which could be used to improve/develop ‘missing’ skills
- System abuse – discriminatory policies and procedures
- Competence inhibiting support
- Top down priorities – lack of partnership with parents
- Child centred focus – child paramount but parent’s needs overlooked
- Conflicting responsibilities – monitoring vs. empowering
- Organizational barriers – not meeting criteria for services & different parts of the service being provided by different agencies
- Crisis driven
- Lack of trust – from parents
- Lack of support
- Parenting more scrutinised

# Parents with Learning Disabilities in Cornwall

- In Cornwall the population figures for parents with learning disabilities and children reflects the increased level of deprivation.
- The Health Visitor Survey and Atlas 2012 (Brigham, Pickett, and Hardwick) found that there were 255 families with an under three year old, who had a learning difficulty living in Cornwall.
- The study found that parents with a learning difficulty had the greatest level of inequality of any group.
- Families with a learning difficulty had between a two and eight fold increase in percentage of the needs variables outlined in the study.

# Aim of the protocol

- The aim of the protocol is to improve joint working to support adults with learning disabilities who are also parents in order to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

# Outcomes

- Improves interagency communication and information sharing through the use of a common protocol.
- Acknowledges and understands the impact of learning disabilities on parenting and children.
- Considers the needs and safety of the children
- Recognises the needs of adults with learning disabilities and as parents
- Supports family life and positive parenting
- Promotes early help for parents with learning difficulties.

# KEY PRINCIPLES

## Whole family approach

- Principles from 'Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family' are embedded within the Guidelines.
- A whole family approach requires adult and child services to work together to offer co-ordinated support to help families overcome challenges and work towards positive outcomes for parents and their children.
- Children are best placed within their families and support should be provided to enable this wherever possible and in the best interests of the child.
- The well-being of children and their families is best served by a multi-agency approach.
- The assessment and care plan should reflect the needs of both the parent and children.

# A preventative approach.

Services need to understand that disabled parents are often reluctant to approach social services for support, as they fear being viewed as inadequate parents and having their children taken away.

- Developing services, pathways, information and awareness in professional teams to counter these beliefs and stereotypes is essential for enabling equality of access for parents with learning disabilities.
- The needs of children are best met when the learning disabled adults support needs are acknowledged, assessed, facilitated and regularly reviewed.
- The needs of disabled adults in their parenting role should be identified and assessed whenever a disabled adults needs are assessed.
- Budgets and services should be flexible to make sure that disabled parents needs are met. When there are complex, inter-related child and adult care needs to be met, cost sharing arrangements between adult's and children's services may be necessary.

# Early help and support

- In determining eligibility for services the protocol recognises the importance of the parenting role and acknowledges the need to provide additional support to families who may not previously have met the threshold for services.
- Parents should be assessed, not only in their right as adults, but also as potentially needing support to maintain family life.
- In this way the protocol aims to enable services to work jointly to offer Early Help and to prevent families reaching crisis and the children reaching child protection thresholds.
- Early identification of parents' needs is essential and multi-agency assessment in the antenatal stage is likely to achieve a more positive result.

# Inclusion and accessibility

- Services should think about social inclusion and positive ways to enable families to engage in support and activities in their local communities.
- Parents with learning disabilities should have equal access to all services.
- Services and Professionals should make appropriate adjustments to meet the needs of the parents when making assessments or offering support.
- Parents with learning disabilities should be offered opportunities to access adult education and literacy support.
- Parents should be offered independent advocacy support, especially for meetings and where there are Safeguarding issues.

# Key recommendations

- 1. Accessible information and communication.
- 2. Clear and co-ordinated referral and assessment procedures and processes, eligibility criteria and care pathways.
- 3. Support designed to meet the needs of parents and children based on assessments of their needs and strengths.
- 4. Long-term support where necessary.
- 5. Access to independent advocacy

# Recommendations - continued

- 6. Early Help and intervention
- 7. Support for parents who are unable to care for their child.
- 8. Parental engagement in learning and education
- 9. Flexible funding and co-ordinated packages of support
- 10. Children's welfare and safety is paramount. All professionals involved have a responsibility for the safety and well-being of children
- 11. A multi-agency co-ordination group and training opportunities.

# Multi-agency co-ordination Group

- Champions/representatives from each service/agency.
- Requires management support.
- Quarterly meetings.
- Focus on implementation and evaluation.
- Needs analysis with public health
- Problem solving and service improvement.
- Improving joint working and local care pathways.
- Successful launch.
- Space for difficult conversations, re: complex work, in complex systems in challenging times!

# Promoting Joint Working

- Joint Agency Co-ordination Group
- Revised care pathways and protocols for shared care.
- Joint training
- Multi-agency networks, processes and practice development meetings. TAC meetings, if working well, are excellent.
- Having a key worker who co-ordinates support.
- Liaison posts: e.g. a post within adult learning disability services with specific responsibility to liaise with children's services, or vice versa.
- Well published 'Joint Agency Protocol'.
- This includes very specific guidance on support for parents who are unable to care for their children's
- Signs of Safety

# Signs of Safety

- Excellent approach for parents with a learning disability.
- Acknowledges strengths and resources in parents and wider family.
- Visual scaling helps parents understand concerns and need to change.
- Solution focused approach whilst clearly identifying safeguarding concerns.
- Ensures professionals simply and clearly articulate concerns in a way parents understand and also supports them to change.

# Protocols

*Down load from CFT – Special Parenting Page*

The Full Protocol and an easy read version can be obtained from:

<http://www.cornwallfoundationtrust.nhs.uk/cft/OurServices/ChildrenAndYoungPeople/SpecialParenting.g.asp>