



## **PLYMOUTH PARENT PARTNERSHIP**

### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Impartiality Policy**

In order to increase parents' confidence in Parent Partnership Services the Government set out clear expectations for Parent Partnership Services in every area of practice by way of exemplification of the minimum standards in the SEN Code of Practice. The standards set out in the exemplifications aim to strengthen the 'arm's length' nature of Parent Partnership Services. In delivering effective Parent Partnership Services, Local Authorities are expected to ensure there is a published policy on how the Parent Partnership Service acts in an impartial way and provides a comprehensive and balanced range of information for parents.

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In all our work we will seek to ensure that information and support given to parents<sup>1</sup>, carers, and to professional workers is impartial. Understanding impartiality and how it is evidenced in practice has been, and remains, a core theme in the development of our service. This is so for all areas of our work, including:

- our core team response to parents and professionals as service users
- the work of PSAs (Parent Support Advisers) in schools
- the approach to parents that we promote in the multi-agency delivery of parenting programmes coordinated by Parent Partnership.

This policy document sets out our thinking and practice with regard to impartiality. PPP starting points for ensuring impartiality are:

- Attempting definitions of the word
- Understandings of factors that influence partiality and impartiality

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document the word 'parent' is taken to include all those with a direct responsibility for parenting. These might be birth parents, step-parents, grandparents or other members of the family, foster or adoptive parents or other adult caregivers.

- Examining how impartiality fits with targeted work
- Raising awareness of key themes in parent partnership practice
- Achieving structures and organisational arrangements that reassure parents that the service is impartial

### **Definitions:**

Dictionary definitions include ‘not partial, unprejudiced, fair’ (OED); ‘not favouring one person, etc., more than another; fair and unbiased’ (Chambers); showing lack of favouritism; *the cold neutrality of an impartial judge* (Webster’s); ‘free from undue bias or preconceived opinions; *an unprejudiced appraisal of the pros and cons, the impartial eye of a scientist*’ (Webster’s). Such definitions are helpful but one person’s ideas of fairness, neutrality, or perception of the role of judge or scientist, may be another person’s perceptions of demonstration of vested power, lack of understanding, or adherence to political beliefs or faith interests. The well - known saying *‘Having no axe to grind’*, essentially of not preparing either side for battle is pertinent here. Similarly, *‘You can talk to me because I’ve got nothing to win and nothing to lose’*.

It may be productive to equally consider a definition of partiality, the absence of which seems essential to evidencing impartiality. The OED offers ‘inclined antecedently to favour one party in a cause, or one side of the question more than the other’, ‘prejudiced or biased in someone’s favour’, and ‘pertaining to or involving a part only’. We also like the OED’s ‘Partialism: a partial theory or view which does not take into account all the facts. From these varied emphases, we currently synthesise a definition of impartiality as:

***‘Not taking sides, not favouring one point of view over another because of preconceived ideas or beliefs, and ensuring that all available facts, truths, opinions and perceptions are being shared openly.’***

### **Factors that influence partiality and impartiality**

Achieving impartiality in service delivery calls for professional awareness of many factors that may influence us (or any of the wide range of our service users) towards partial understanding of events or information. These might include:

1. Recognising the factors that can lead to people constructing different understandings of the same event. Examples could be:
  - *Previous experience of similar situations*
  - *Misunderstandings of the purpose of the event, differing agendas*
  - *Difficulties with language or other communications used during the event*
  - *Power differentials across participants*

- *Lack of information*
  - *Interpreting requests for clarification or justification as confrontational or conflictual*
  - *Differing interpretation of meaning behind words*
  - *Stereotypical held views – deficit models of others*
  - *Limited time for an effective explanation to have been given by participants*
  - *Information overload and not being able to remember all that took place*
2. Recognising that differing perceptions of the same event are very real to each person concerned.
  3. Understanding and being able to explain the difficulties that can arise from partial views of any given situation.
  4. Recognising the links between honesty, impartiality and confidentiality.
  5. Understanding that impartiality or partiality is demonstrated not only in the content of words used, but in body language, references to others that suggest affiliation or collusion, and communications that patronise the views of others.
  6. Recognising that people pass through a series of stages in changing their attitudes, perceptions and willingness to contemplate alternative ways of understanding events and choices for the future. Sometimes there may be a need for high quality and impartial support for lengthy periods.
  7. Acknowledging that a service or an organisation may convey partiality in its agenda via the ways that it seeks to engage with service users, to target potential service users, or by being in a position where service users are directed to attend the service or such attendance is legally enforced.

### **Impartiality and targeted work**

The last points in the previous section lead to consideration of how to ensure that the process of support offered by Parent Partnership can be impartial, not just the information provided. We believe it is essential that we are seen to provide a service that does not seek to persuade, direct, or pursue individual parents to a particular course of action. Our service is to help parents to make informed choices, to give informed consent, and to participate fully in decisions and developments that affect them as parents, their children and their families. Our services to parents are provided only at the request of parents and with their permission.

Parent Partnership works with many other agencies in the planning and delivery of a wide range of direct services to parents across Plymouth. This collaborative partnership working needs to be premised on and informed by an understanding

of Parent Partnership's service ethos of impartiality. This may lead to some difficulties in developing shared understanding of approaches to be used with parents. This may be so when a school or other agency feels that those whom they might refer to as 'hard to reach' parents would respond to unsolicited contact from a PSA, from Parent Partnership with regard to attending a parenting programme or to be offered advice by an Information Support Worker about options that that school or agency wants the parent to consider.

If it is to be seen by its service users to 'not take sides' and , 'not favour one point of view over another...' then it is important that parents do not feel Parent Partnership is accepting another agency's agenda for intervention to the exclusion of parents' views or choice about that intervention. This is not possible where issues of child protection or civil safety are involved and there has to be some partiality in practice, unless one is to adopt a form of neutrality based in moral or social indifference. We believe that being sensitive to parents' views and maintaining the best levels of impartiality in information, explanation and support to them enables sustainable engagement – including for many categories of vulnerable parents. We seek to reduce barriers to engagement. These can include:

- simply not knowing the service exists;
- not knowing how to engage with a service;
- anxiety or fear about a school or other agency;
- language, gender, cultural or financial barriers.

Although we seek to maintain impartiality we do accept that we target some groups of parents and with selective dissemination of information and promotion of services seek to reduce barriers to particular groups of parents engaging with our service, with schools and other services to children and families. The statutory duty of Parent Partnerships is as a targeted service to parents of children with additional needs / disabilities. Plymouth's Parent Partnership includes this targeted work among many others. In Plymouth there are priority themes in the Parent and Family Support Strategy that we seek to address and these include targeted improvement of information and support that we provide to groups of parents such as fathers, parents of families with black and minority ethnic backgrounds, parents misusing substances and so on. In our work for the Choice Advice programme, there is targeted work with parents who have not completed admissions application to express preference for choice of secondary school for their child. In the coordination and delivery of evidence based parenting programmes there may be target groups of vulnerable parents that particular strands of central or local government policy seek to engage. In the work of PSAs in schools there may be some parents that schools target for improved engagement and who are asked by the school if they would like support from a PSA.

In all our direct work with parents, and in any work for which we hold shared governance of practice, we will ensure that engagement with targeted groups of parents is based on gaining parents permission for that engagement. We are convinced, for example, that in the work of PSAs across the city this has been a key theme for successful engagement. Plymouth's PSAs work with parents from every background including many from families who face cycles of disadvantage, who experience critical incidents, or who are in difficult circumstances. PSAs have established relationships of trust with many parents who have previously not felt able to engage with schools and support services.

A factor that we have seen to underpin that trust is that PSAs do not cold call on any individual parents or target individual parents and approach them without the parent's prior agreement. Our position is that any member of school staff, or indeed any staff from other agencies, friends, neighbours, can always ask any parent if they would like to talk with a PSA, and with the parent's permission the contact can then be arranged or the parent can approach the PSA directly.

### **Key themes in parent partnership practice**

Being able to achieve impartiality in service delivery also calls for awareness of frequent themes in Parent Partnership practice and in supporting parents in diverse family and community settings, at differing stages of parenting, and in varied relationships with schools, Local Authority and other services. These might include:

1. To seek to resolve any conflict between the views of the school, the Local Authority or the parent, rather than to promote any of them.
2. To understand that a series of unplanned and unintended events (examples could be school / other agency staff absence, failure in telephone / email systems / postal delays, need for urgent prioritisation of other things, etc.) can conspire to convince a parent that the 'system' is against them.
3. To support parents, individually or collectively, to convey their views to schools, the Local Authority and other agencies.
4. To differentiate between advocacy, representation and information exchange. We interpret advocacy to be promoting / defending a particular point of view relative to others being expressed. PPP advocates only for parent participation in general and promotes and supports structures that enable representatives to convey collective views from parents. It does not act as advocate for any individual parent or act to represent an individual parent's views.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In early 2009 a voluntary sector organisation, the Plymouth Family Support Service, closed. It had provided the Parent Advocacy Service for parents of children facing child protection meetings. Parent Partnership agreed to provide this service to enable continuity for parents with such needs. The name has been maintained to indicate the continuity, but the work delivered fits

5. To support best practice in information exchange and supporting individual parents to ensure their views are understood by others and vice versa. This kind of support can include conveying the views of an individual parent / carer, at their request, with their permission and with content agreed beforehand, should they feel unable to speak in a meeting they are attending where we are supporting them. We would however always encourage parents to voice their own views.

In cases where our staff voiced the views of a parent / carer we would overtly check immediately afterward that we had captured what they wished us to convey.

6. To recognise that confidentiality is a permissive phenomenon and that proactive, impartial exploration with a parent about which information can be shared can be constructive and effective in achieving solutions.
7. To both support parents and, as part of that process, to offer constructive challenge to perceptions of some events.
8. To understand that separating or separated parents may hold very partial views of events compared to each other.
9. To recognise that parents facing court proceedings, stressful procedures or meetings may present extremely partial perceptions.
10. To be authentic and honest in working with parents, not only listening and agreeing, but maintaining a well-informed reality frame from which to inform parents' choice and planning.
11. To avoid over-identification between a parent's situation or dilemmas and one's own personal experience.

### **Structures and organisational arrangements to evidence impartiality**

Lastly, PPP must examine the structures, procedures and organisational arrangements it offers that evidence its impartiality in its delivery of service. These include:

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1. Training and supervision of staff, including observed practice, that explores all of the points in this section and includes looking at many examples of practice where impartiality has informed or underpinned the impact achieved.

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with our approach to information, explanation and support to parents, not with our understanding of 'advocacy'. The name, and our interpretation of 'advocacy' will reviewed at a later date.

2. Transparency about the relationship of the PPP and the Local Authority, as set out in Section One of the PPP Service Description. Since 2003, when the PPP was restructured to be a within-house arm's length service of the Local Authority, there has been agreement about anticipating and avoiding conflict between the Authority and PPP in its delivery of service. Section Three of the PPP Service Description has remained substantively the same since that date, with only minor amendments to reflect the changed landscape for integrated Children's Services and changing terminology.
3. The PPP is located to avoid any adverse perceptions of its impartiality. It is away from the Authority's main base at Windsor House and is based on two sites. The main base, with its own separate accommodation, is at Martinsgate (predominantly Adult & Community Learning and Further Education building with city centre open access). The second, is at the Treasury Building in Catherine Street and is currently the only service in that building. Longcause Oasis Centre and John Kitto Community College, also host the PPP's two resource bases for parents where books, DVDs and other information materials are available for loan to parents or those working with parents.
4. PPP has its clear service identity, its own logo, its own direct URL web-site, and provides a comprehensive range of publications to inform parents, including a directory of services for parents and families.
5. PPP has created a range of strategic vehicles to enable parents' views to influence the development of service to families, and leads the city's strategic approach to parent participation. It is responsible for the Plymouth Parent & Family Forum that meets bi-monthly and at which a wide range of parent representatives meet with service providers and commissioners. PPP ensures that the full range of parents views is heard through the Forum, through Parent Reference groups that inform the City's Parent & Family Support Strategy and the Integrated Disability Service, through support to parent members of working groups, interview panels and other channels (see Sections 7 and 8 of the PPP Service Description).
6. PPP is accountable to its multi-sectorial Development Group for its development of service performance, direction and assessment of performance. This is not a management group, but has an essential role in ensuring the arms-length status of the service (see Section 8 of the PPP Service Description). From its inception in 2003 its terms of reference have focussed on monitoring the impartiality of the service, including parents' perceptions of the identity of the service in all its interactions with parents, schools, other agencies and the Local Authority. It is chaired by a parent. Membership and decision-taking arrangements ensure a balance between parent and professional views.

7. As explained in section 10 of the service description, the evaluation form that is sent to parents contacting the core team includes a question about the level of impartiality perceived by the parent in the service they receive.

*Dr. Peter Jones, revised July 2009*