



## RESEARCH REPORT

# Disabled parents' involvement in their children's education: an examination of good practice

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## Related documents

This research report is one part of a set of four publications resulting from this research. A guidance document for schools, a parents' leaflet and an accessible summary are also available at [www.cfbt.com](http://www.cfbt.com). This report is available in other formats on request. Contact [research@cfbt.com](mailto:research@cfbt.com).



## Executive summary

“...few studies have looked at the needs and rights of disabled parents in relation to their children’s education....”

### Background

It is well established that children do better at school when their parents are involved in their education, and supporting parents’ participation is a central objective of education policy throughout the United Kingdom. However, few studies have looked at the needs and rights of disabled parents in relation to their children’s education although it is clear that disabled parents can face a number of barriers. Rather than looking at the difficulties, however, this study focused on identifying and exploring examples of good practice in order to produce guidance for schools.

### Study aims

The specific aims of the research were:

- To examine the UK policy and research context relating to disabled parents’ involvement in their children’s education;
- To explore disabled parents’ experiences of involvement in their children’s education, with a focus on good practice;
- To identify factors which help promote good professional practice in this area, what impedes the process and how any barriers can be reduced.

The study began with a critical review of UK-wide policy and a brief review of research relating to parental involvement in education with a particular focus on disabled parents, followed by key informant interviews. The second part of the study comprised case studies with disabled parents who have had positive experiences of being involved in their children’s education. Interviews were conducted with 24 parents with a range of impairments throughout Scotland and the north of England. We also spoke to a small number of professionals



**“ Disabled parents viewed parental involvement in their children’s education as very important and beneficial for their children. ”**

within schools or local authorities who were able to shed further light on the good practice initiatives identified by parents.

### **Key findings**

- While legal frameworks, policy initiatives and parental involvement infrastructures vary across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the role of parents has become increasingly prioritised in education policy throughout Britain since the 1990s.
- Parental involvement is promoted throughout the four jurisdictions, with differing emphasis, in three ways: in the individual child’s learning; in the life of the school; and on formal representative bodies.
- Parental involvement legislation applies to all parents and although it makes no specific reference to disabled parents it has to be implemented in accordance with both the general and specific duties described in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. There is support from policy makers and practitioners for more specific guidance to ensure disabled parents’ involvement. It was suggested that consideration be given to mechanisms for identifying disabled parents and the interface between disability, parental involvement and inclusive education legislation.
- While there are currently no mechanisms for monitoring disabled parents’ involvement, the increasing profile of parental involvement in inspection processes throughout the United Kingdom, at both national and local authority level, coupled with authorities’ and agencies’ own obligations under the DDA, provides a timely opportunity for action.
- Disabled parents viewed parental involvement in their children’s education as very important and beneficial for their children. A diverse group, their involvement



“ *Parents wanted disclosure made easier and suggested that schools become ‘disclosure friendly....’* ”

in their own child’s learning, the life of the school and representation on formal bodies, varied in nature and intensity. It was suggested that parental involvement might be more important for disabled than non-disabled parents because of their reduced opportunities to participate in and contribute to the social life of their communities.

- Disabled parents’ involvement was supported in three distinct ways: by anticipatory adjustments, mostly related to physical accessibility, by individual adjustments which addressed their own particular needs and through support mechanisms for all parents, for example pupil, parent and family support groups, homework clubs, availability of parent liaison staff and external agencies. An inclusive school ethos and good communication practices were also identified as key factors facilitating involvement.
- The current onus on disabled parents to disclose impairment causes stress. Parents wanted disclosure made easier and suggested that schools become ‘disclosure friendly’ by emphasising they encourage and support all parents, specifically including disabled parents.

Our study shows that an inclusive ethos, a supportive and accessible head teacher, appropriate generic support and flexible structures coupled with positive and informed attitudes promote the equal involvement of disabled parents. The following conclusions highlight the key issues to be addressed by policy makers and practitioners to better support disabled parents.

## Conclusions

- Disabled parents are not a visible group: therefore consideration has to be given to ways of identifying them. Schools need to find a non-stigmatising way of asking parents what their support needs are. Disabled parents are more likely to disclose if they believe that it will lead to support that will benefit their child's education.
- All home-school communications to parents should be in formats that are accessible to them individually and all staff involved with a disabled parent should be aware of their individual communication support needs.
- Schools that present an informal, flexible and accessible atmosphere facilitate the involvement of disabled parents. Parents with learning disabilities and those experiencing mental distress particularly welcome verbal communication and a personal contact at the school.
- Disabled parents of children with additional support needs often find formal meetings about their children's education very stressful. Schools can minimise this by keeping meetings as informal as possible, providing parents with adequate information in accessible formats and being flexible about meeting times.
- While all disabled parents benefit from anticipatory adjustments, their individual circumstances differ. Schools can provide the right initial support by communicating with the individual parent and can then plan how to anticipate and address future barriers.
- Disability awareness training for school communities, including input for pupils, was identified as the best way of overcoming attitudinal barriers experienced by disabled people, particularly those with mental distress. It was recommended that disability organisations be involved in delivering the training not only for school communities but

“ *Disabled parents of children with additional support needs often find formal meetings about their children’s education very stressful.* ”

for initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) courses.

- Dedicated parental involvement staff enhances disabled parents’ involvement.

“ The focus of this research is very much on identifying and exploring examples of good practice in involving disabled parents within schools and local education authorities. ”

## Introduction

This report comes at the end of an 11 month study exploring disabled parents’ experiences of involvement in their children’s education. Supporting parents’ participation in their children’s schooling has been a government goal for decades. However, previous research has shown that some groups of parents face particular barriers to involvement. This includes disabled parents – although few studies (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003<sup>1</sup>, Wates 2004<sup>2</sup>, Morris 2004<sup>3</sup>, Robinson et al<sup>4</sup>) have focused on their experiences. The focus of this research is very much on identifying and exploring examples of good practice in involving disabled parents within schools and local education authorities. These case studies of individuals’ positive experiences are set alongside a review of relevant literature, a critical analysis of wider policy and practice frameworks across the UK, and an analysis of key informant interviews.

The report begins with a brief resumé of the project aims and methods. It goes on to present the key findings of the research and finishes with a conclusion which draws out implications for policy and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Task Force on Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role (2003) *The Right Support* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<sup>2</sup> Wates, M. (2004) *Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<sup>3</sup> Morris, J. (2004) *Disabled Parents and Schools* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, S. et al (2001) *More than getting through the gate: The involvement of parents with a disability in their children’s school education in NWS* Disability Council of NSW

## Study aims

The aims of the research were:

- To examine the UK policy and research context relating to disabled parents' involvement in their children's education;
- To explore disabled parents' experiences of involvement in their children's education, with a focus on good practice;
- To identify factors which help promote good professional practice in this area, what impedes the process and how any barriers can be reduced.

“...interviews were carried out with 12 ‘key informants’ north and south of the border, using a semi-structured questionnaire.”

## Methods

### Ethical approval

Approval for the research was obtained from the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee. It also approved Information Sheets and Consent Forms for the project. The Information Sheet and Consent Form for parents with learning disabilities were also recorded on a CD-Rom.

### Overview of research

An examination of research on parental involvement in children’s education and disabled parents’ experiences of education services was carried out. While not a systematic literature review this overview draws out the key themes, issues and debates that have emerged in recent years.

### Policy analysis

An analysis of policy frameworks across Britain relating to parents’ (especially disabled parents’) participation in their children’s education was conducted. This involved identifying and scrutinising relevant legislation, guidance and policy documents in the four jurisdictions of the UK, along with information about significant policy initiatives. This work enabled comparison of the situation in different parts of Britain, which is of particular interest given that educational and social policy is developed separately in the four jurisdictions.

### Key informant interviews

In order to gain an overview of current debates and issues, and examine how policy is implemented, interviews were carried out with 12 ‘key informants’ north and south of the border, using a semi-structured questionnaire (see

Appendix A). Respondents included:

- Scottish Government's Schools Division
- HMIE
- National Council of Parent Teacher Associations
- Learning and Teaching Scotland
- Scottish Parent Teacher Council
- Scottish Parent Councils Association
- Scottish Parental Involvement Officers Network
- Disabled Parents Network.

Unfortunately, repeated attempts to secure interviews with policy makers in Wales and Northern Ireland proved unsuccessful. In Wales, responsibility for different elements of policy affecting disabled parents' participation in their children's education is shared between various individuals: we were told it was not possible to identify an appropriate person for the interview. In Northern Ireland, the most appropriate respondent was about to retire. He did however send written responses to some of the questions.

The interviews with Scottish respondents were conducted face to face while those with respondents elsewhere in the UK were conducted by telephone. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours (although most were about an hour). With respondents' permission the data were audio recorded and fully transcribed. A manual analysis was conducted, with two main aims: first, to examine how policies set out in legislation and documents are being implemented in practice; secondly, to identify pointers for good practice.



“...the aim was to achieve roughly equal numbers of parents with learning disabilities, mobility impairments, sensory impairments and mental distress.”

## Case studies of good practice

A topic guide for interviews with parents was designed to be used flexibly to suit parents with different stories and support needs (see Appendix B). A sampling frame was devised based on the following inclusion criteria:

- *Experiences of good practice*: it is recognised that parents may have experienced good and bad practice but the study’s focus on highlighting creative ways of overcoming barriers required parents in the sample to have some ‘good stories’ to tell. ‘Good practice’, at the recruitment stage, was as defined by parents although when the data were analysed, these accounts were not treated uncritically. (For example, other research has suggested that some people with learning disabilities have relatively low expectations of services.)
- *Type of impairment*: the aim was to achieve roughly equal numbers of parents with learning disabilities, mobility impairments, sensory impairments and mental distress<sup>1</sup>. These groups are likely to face different barriers (although they may also experience some in common, such as attitudinal barriers).
- *Geographic location*: The aim was to recruit equal numbers of parents north and south of the border. To reduce costs, key target geographical areas were central Scotland and northern England.
- *Gender*: The aim was to include a mix of fathers and mothers, while recognising that mothers may often play a more active role in communicating with schools and are also more likely than fathers to take part in social research about their children.

Overall, the achieved sample was successful in meeting most of these aims. Twenty-four parents with a range of impairments were recruited, 13 in England and 11 in

<sup>1</sup> We use ‘mental distress’ because it is a term favoured by the movement of users/survivors of psychiatric services. Other terms commonly used denote or imply illness.

Scotland. However, only four fathers took part and people with mental health issues were more difficult to recruit.

Over 30 voluntary agencies in England and Scotland were asked to circulate a 'flyer' about the study to their members, service users or other relevant contacts with a view to recruiting parents. Interviews were arranged at a time and place convenient to each parent.

Interviews were carried out in both Scotland and England with a small number of professionals, identified by parents as helpful in overcoming barriers to involvement, or associated with inclusive initiatives or policies. Professionals interviewed included head teachers, assistant head teachers, a classroom assistant and a children's rights worker. All interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted between 15 and 40 minutes. Again with respondents' permission the data were audio recorded and fully transcribed. See Appendix C for the topic guide used in these interviews.

**“ A Research Advisory Group (RAG) was set up to give guidance on aspects of the design and conduct of the study. ”**

## **The Research Advisory Group**

A Research Advisory Group (RAG) was set up to give guidance on aspects of the design and conduct of the study. The group included policy-making, practice and parental perspectives, drawn from the statutory and voluntary sectors north and south of the border. The RAG members represented:

- The Parenting Network, People First Scotland (2 parents and a supporter)
- Disabled Parents Network (a UK-wide organisation of disabled people based in Oxford) (1 parent)
- Scottish Parent Teacher Council (1 parent)
- Outlet (a mental health advocacy organisation in Glasgow) (1 partner of a parent)

- Working Together with Parents (a UK wide network) (2 practitioners)
- School Leaders Scotland (1 head teacher)
- Department for Children, Schools and Families – Family Development and Delivery Division: 1 civil servant
- Scottish Government (Schools Division: Parent Involvement Team): 1 senior civil servant
- CfBT – Research Manager
- Scottish Parental Involvement Officers Network

While not a management group, the RAG acted as a ‘critical friend’, highlighting issues for our consideration, offering insights from their particular perspectives and experiences, personal or professional, and drawing attention to any weaknesses or omissions in the research. The RAG met on three occasions during the research. Many useful suggestions and feedback were offered which were incorporated in the project.

The next sections of the report present the main findings of the study, starting with an account of relevant research.

## Findings

### 1. Overview of research

The following overview of recent research about parental involvement in children's education, with some focus on disabled parents, is not a systematic literature review. It does however document key themes, issues and debates to have emerged in recent years. It is divided into three main sections – the impact of parental involvement on children's educational outcomes; the ways in which schools are working to support parental participation in general; and disabled parents' experiences of education services. Relatively little research has been conducted on the latter topic although the amount of research and policy literature of relevance to the relationship between disabled parents and their children's schools is increasing.

#### ***The impact of parental involvement on children's education***

It is well established that children do better at school when their parents are involved in their education (Desforges 2003)<sup>5</sup>. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003)<sup>6</sup> cited multiple evidence to conclude that:

***'research has shown conclusively that parental involvement does make a difference to pupils' engagement and their achievement and the evidence indicates that parental involvement benefits students, parents, teachers and schools' (3).***

Following Desforges (2003), DfES also found that, in the early years, parental involvement has a significant impact on children's cognitive development and literacy and number skills, that parental involvement for a child between the ages of 7 and 16 is a more powerful force than family background,

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<sup>5</sup> Desforges, C. with Abouchaar, A. (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review* DfES Research Report 433 London: Department for Education and Skills

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education* Nottingham: DfES

“...parental involvement has a significant positive effect on pupil achievement throughout the years of schooling.”

size of family and level of parental education, and that parental involvement has a significant positive effect on pupil achievement throughout the years of schooling. Neither this report nor Desforges (2003) makes specific mention of disabled parents, although Desforges' systematic review of literature does include a conclusion that 'problems with maternal psycho-social health (especially depression) have a negative impact on involvement' (2003: 41) and, in line with Harris and Goodall (2008)<sup>7</sup>, that material poverty also has a powerful negative impact.

Using in-depth case studies of 20 English schools alongside school performance data, Harris and Goodall (2008) make a distinction between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in their child's learning. They find that only the engagement of parents in learning in the home makes a positive difference to educational outcomes for children, whilst involvement in the school may support social and community outcomes. They conclude that clarity of purpose for parental involvement may be helpful, so that parents, school and student know why it is being encouraged and supported. They suggest that guidance and support with learning at home, and school flexibility, for example of meeting times and locations, may be helpful in supporting parents to be involved. The study makes no mention of disabled parents, although from secondary research they reinforce that there are social and economic barriers for parents in both types of involvement, and there is evidence that disabled parents tend to face more social and economic barriers than the average parent.

### ***Parents, participation and school practice***

Peters et al (2008)<sup>8</sup> found that parents of a child with a Statement of Special Educational Needs, amongst other groups, were more likely than average to feel very involved with their children's education. The desire to get more involved

<sup>7</sup> Harris, A. and Goodall, J. (2008) *Do Parents Know They Matter? Engaging All Parents in Learning* Educational Research 50 (3): 277–289

<sup>8</sup> Peters, M., Seeds, K., Goldstein, A., Coleman, N. (2008) *Parental Involvement in Children's Education 2007*. BMRB Social Research, Research Report DCSF-RR034. London: DCSF

**“ ...best practice had an explicit aim of involving parents and carers, that senior staff leadership was vital and that the most successful involvement made parents active partners. ”**

tended to be stronger amongst disadvantaged groups, including respondents with a long-term illness or disability. They suggest that ‘further work may be needed to understand how to get these parents more involved and understand their barriers to involvement’ (7). The evidence of Peters et al suggests that a focus on disabled parents’ involvement may provide an opportunity for schools both to tap into a desire for more involvement and to overcome impairment-based and socio-economic barriers.

Ofsted (2007)<sup>9</sup>, in a telephone survey and inspection of 25 schools in England, aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of school involvement of parents and carers in the education of children. They found that best practice had an explicit aim of involving parents and carers, that senior staff leadership was vital and that the most successful involvement made parents active partners. They also found that parents of disabled pupils were more closely involved than those of other groups of pupils, mirroring findings by Peters et al (2008), and that in the best practice, successful work with these families was used as a model for improving parental involvement across the whole school. Given the disproportionate number of disabled parents with disabled children (Peters et al 2008), it is striking that disabled parents are not mentioned in the study. This gives a further sense of the ‘invisibility’ of disabled parents, but also suggests an opportunity for inspectors to ask appropriate questions, and to make disabled parents’ involvement a more salient issue for schools.

Peters et al (2008), reporting on the third wave (2007) of a DfES representative sample survey of parental involvement in children’s education in England, found that 51% of all respondents felt very involved in their child’s school life: this had increased from 29% in 2001 to 38% in 2004. Overall, parents felt increasingly involved in their child’s school life and were more likely to see education as their own responsibility as well as that of the school. This suggests a clear positive

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<sup>9</sup> Ofsted (2007) *Parents, Carers and Schools* Manchester: Ofsted



trend in the impact of parental involvement policy on parents' lives.

Around three in four parents felt that it was extremely important to help with their child's homework, a similar proportion to previous years. The same proportion said they felt confident when helping their children with homework; a proportion which had fallen a little since 2001 for reasons including changing teaching methods and a lack of understanding of the child's work. This supports the findings of Harris and Goodall (2008) who suggest that schools need to provide clearer guidance for parents on learning at home. An ongoing project funded by the DfES (2009)<sup>10</sup>, exploring how schools can support parents with their children's 'at home' learning and development, may provide further helpful guidance. Page and Millar (2009)<sup>11</sup> also provide a generic guide for schools on the practicalities of supporting parents' involvement at different levels, although this again makes no mention of disabled parents.

<sup>10</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *'Learning at Home, Learning at School'* Action Research Project London: DCSF <http://www.learning-hs.org.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> Page, A. and Millar, C. (2009) *School-Parent Partnerships: A Short Guide* London: The Family and Parenting Institute

<sup>12</sup> Olsen, R. and Wates, M. (2003) *Disabled Parents: Examining Research Assumptions* Dartington: Research in Practice

<sup>13</sup> Olsen, R. (2005) 'Disabled Parents – Historical Overview and Policy Context' in Newman, T. and Wates, M. *Disabled Parents And Their Children: Building A Better Future: A Discussion Document* Barking: Barnardo's

<sup>14</sup> McKay, S. and Clarke, H. (2008) *Exploring Disability, Family Formation and Break-Up: Reviewing the Evidence* Research Report No 514. London: Department for Work and Pensions

Peters et al (2008) also found that parents' preferences about home-school communication had changed over time, with parents feeling more positive about the ways in which schools communicate with them. Twenty-eight per cent found informal discussions their most useful mode of communication with the school, compared to 10% in 2001. Previously, parents' evenings had been seen as the most useful means of communication. This opens up possibilities for how schools may be flexible in communicating with parents, including disabled parents, again endorsing the findings of Harris and Goodall (2008).

### **Research with and about disabled parents**

Research in relation to disabled parents has historically placed a focus on the parenting capacities of the parent and the perceived impact on children, in isolation from other



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social factors such as family context, supports provided and economic position (Olsen and Wates 2003)<sup>12</sup>. Olsen (2005)<sup>13</sup> identifies a number of examples of disabled parents being strikingly absent from policy and practice literature on mainstream parent support. McKay and Clarke (2008)<sup>14</sup> similarly identify research about disabled parents tending to fall into either clinical research, focused on impairment and ‘pathology’, and non-clinical literature, having a greater focus on lived experience.

For Olsen, this history constructs disabled parents as a ‘social problem’ (2005: 14) studied through the lens of child welfare. He concludes that this:

***‘reflects a deeper ambivalence about the idea of disabled people having children, which is rooted in deeply held assumptions that disabled people are the recipients rather than the providers of care’ (2005: 19).***

He notes a shift in research since the 1990s towards understanding disabled parents in terms of the barriers that they commonly face and the context in which disabled parents live, adding that:

***‘The key task remains to take the alternative argument, that children’s best interests are secured when they have adequately supported parents’ (2005: 23).***

### ***Disabled parents and schools***

Most studies about disabled parents have focused on social care, health services or child protection systems and there is a large – and contested – literature on ‘young carers’. Research has identified a range of barriers to parenting faced by disabled people. These include the patchy support available, difficulties accessing information and advice, and failure to consult disabled parents about policies and services (Olsen and Wates 2003). Olsen and Tyers (2006)<sup>15</sup>, who explored

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<sup>15</sup> Olsen, R. and Tyers, H. (2006) *Think Parent: Supporting disabled adults as parents* London: National Family and Parenting Institute

support offered to disabled parents by a range of agencies, found that many professionals lacked confidence in offering support.

Wates (2003)<sup>16</sup> surveyed the views of over 150 disabled parents about a range of services. In relation to education, she found that access to preschool provision was limited and to day nursery places, variable. Parents generally found contact with staff in day nurseries supportive and informative. Information about choosing a suitable school was less available; parents had to be proactive, for example, visiting schools to explore access issues and attitudes to disability. Some parents felt schools did not accept their responsibilities to involve disabled parents and that attitudes could vary between teachers within the same school. The presence of supportive head teachers or governors was critical. Wates concludes that involvement in their children's education 'shouldn't be down to luck' or 'determined detective work' by parents (p 58).

A Task Force set up by the Joseph Rowntree Trust (2003)<sup>17</sup> to examine ways of supporting disabled parents also identified participation in their children's education as a problem area. Morris (2004) subsequently canvassed views from 45 disabled parents and their organisations. She found good and bad examples of schools promoting parental participation. Morris concludes that inaccessible buildings or methods of communication and negative staff attitudes are the main obstacles to parental participation. Difficulties included information provision, visiting schools, getting children to school, relationships with teachers and helping children get the most out of their education.

More recently, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) (2009)<sup>18</sup> examined how well local services, including education, provided support to disabled parents. Disabled parents' concerns included general school accessibility, not

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<sup>16</sup> Wates, M. (2003) *It Shouldn't be Down to Luck: Results of a DPN consultation with disabled parents on access to information and services to support parenting* London: Disabled Parents Network

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation Task Force on Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role (2003) *The Right Support* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

<sup>18</sup> Commission for Social Care Inspection (2009) *Supporting Disabled Parents: A Family or a Fragmented Approach?* London: CSCI

**“ CSCI found that it was the services that everyone could use, such as education, which were often the most important to disabled parents.... ”**

being able to access parents’ evenings, judgementalism by schools, and school placement decisions which were not always helpful. Some parents suggested that children of disabled parents should be prioritised in relation to school choice, so they would be able to take their children to a school close to home. All these issues, including school distance, may have implications for some disabled parents’ ability to be involved. At one local authority, disabled parents and their families were part of the primary school ‘inclusion agenda’, and disabled school governors were to be specifically recruited.

CSCI found that it was the services that everyone could use, such as education, which were often the most important to disabled parents and that disabled parents wanted better information and communication with services. They did not want assumptions made about their capacity to parent. They recommended involving disabled parents in developing and monitoring services to support those services to become accessible and non-stigmatising. These findings are reinforced by Morris and Wates (2007)<sup>19</sup> who provide a series of case studies to demonstrate the benefits of schools and other agencies working together to support disabled parents and their children – and the risks of not doing this.

In another study, these authors note that within ‘grey’ literature in the context of education, parents with physical and/or sensory impairments, those with mental health support needs and parents with HIV/AIDS have all reported particular barriers in getting their children to school (Morris and Wates 2006<sup>20</sup>). These may fluctuate according to the parent’s state of mental or physical health. They also find from the literature that parents have reported difficulties in their relationships with schools, including unhelpful or negative attitudes, and failure to make buildings and communication accessible.

One previous study has used comparable methods to

<sup>19</sup> Morris, J. and Wates, M. (2007) *Working Together to Support Disabled Parents* SCIE Guide London: Social Care Institute for Excellence

<sup>20</sup> Morris, J. and Wates, M. (2006) *Supporting Disabled Parents and Parents with Additional Support Needs* SCIE Knowledge Review 11 London: Social Care Institute for Excellence

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, S., Hickson, F., Strike, R. (2001) *More Than Getting Through the Gate. The Involvement of Parents who have a Disability in their Children’s School Education in NSW* Sydney: Disability Council of NSW

the present study. Robinson et al (2001)<sup>21</sup> used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of a self-selecting sample of 83 disabled parents with a variety of impairments in being involved with their children's education in New South Wales. They found no clear indications that having a particular impairment led to a particularly positive or negative experience, and found no significant differences between school types. Only two of the parents in the study had continuously supportive and positive interactions with their children's schools. Their recommendations of what needs to change in order to provide better support for disabled parents' involvement cluster into five areas: disclosure of disability, school access and communication issues, liaising with teachers and principals, participation in school activities including governance, and creating a culture of acceptance, including training, education and awareness raising. They find little previous international research on the issue.

Finally, some disabled parents are likely to have particular difficulty in being involved in their children's education – those with learning disabilities (Olsen and Clarke 2003<sup>22</sup>, Tarleton et al 2005<sup>23</sup>), those with mental ill-health (JRF Taskforce 2003<sup>24</sup>), parents with invisible impairments such as Asperger's Syndrome (JRF 2003) and those who are poor and socially disadvantaged (Olsen and Clarke 2003, Wates 2004).

### Summary

Children make better progress at school when their parents are involved in supporting their learning. A number of best practice factors in parental participation have been identified, including commitment at senior level in schools and a partnership approach to working with parents. There is very little reference to disabled parents in the generic parental involvement literature, although various implications can be drawn out. For example, parents generally prefer informal communications with school; parents from disadvantaged

<sup>22</sup> Olsen, R. and Clarke, H. (2003) *Parenting and Disability: Disabled parents' experiences of raising children* Bristol: Policy Press

<sup>23</sup> Tarleton, B., Ward, L. and Howarth, J. (2005) *Finding the Right Support? A review of issues and positive practice in supporting people with learning difficulties and their children* London: The Baring Foundation

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation Task Force on Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role (2003) *The Right Support* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

**“ Obstacles are frequently reported, particularly inaccessible buildings, inaccessible communication and poor staff attitudes. ”**

groups would like to be more involved in their children's education, and it would be beneficial for school inspectorates to pay specific attention to disabled parents' involvement.

Much research about disabled parents has focused on their perceived parenting capacities, sometimes adopting a pathological approach and taking little account of wider social factors. So-called 'new directions' research, often informed or conducted by disabled parents, has identified a range of barriers to parenting for this group. The few studies which have looked at disabled parents' involvement in their children's education have reported mixed experiences. Some good practice exists but tends to be ad hoc, with parents often having to be proactive to secure appropriate support for involvement. Obstacles are frequently reported, particularly inaccessible buildings, inaccessible communication and poor staff attitudes. Little if any research has examined ways to overcome such obstacles.

“ *Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995... must make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in relation to non-disabled people.* ”

## 2. Policy review

### *The legislative framework – disability equality*

The policy review identified a number of significant differences in definition, content and focus in the legislative frameworks, guidance and policy initiatives relating to parental involvement across the UK. At the same time, Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which applies across Britain, states that educational institutions in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland must make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in relation to non-disabled people. These duties are ‘anticipatory’, which means that institutions should always anticipate the general requirements of a wide range of people with impairments.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005 introduced extra duties which apply only to England, Wales and Scotland. Significantly for this research, these new responsibilities included the Disability Equality Duty, which applies to most public authorities in England, Wales and Scotland. The Disability Equality Duty comprises three duties – the ‘general’ and two ‘specific’ duties. The general duty focuses on promoting equality between disabled and non-disabled people. The former clearly includes disabled parents. The specific duties require public authorities to publish a Disability Equality Scheme (DES) setting out how they are fulfilling their general duty and certain Secretaries of State must publish reports for their policy areas every three years. The DES must include, among other things, information about how disabled people were involved in developing the DES and how they are being supported to play an equal role in the life of the organisation, an Action Plan, and arrangements for monitoring and assessing impact. Schemes had to be published by December 2006.



The Disability Equality Duty in England and Wales specified that most individual schools, as well as education authorities, were required to produce a DES. In Scotland it specified that education authorities, and only grant-aided schools, were required to produce a DES. The Disability Rights Commission produced guidance on implementing the Disability Equality Duty for schools in England and Wales<sup>25</sup> and in Scotland<sup>26</sup>.

In Northern Ireland there is a similar duty to consult disabled people on equality schemes produced by public authorities under Section 75 equality legislation (Northern Ireland Act 1998) and also on disability action plans, introduced as a duty for public authorities in 2007. These are monitored by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, individual schools are not included as public authorities.

In England the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) produced detailed guidance on the implementation of the Disability Equality Duty which was distributed to all schools and early years settings. The DCSF<sup>27</sup> acknowledges that it does not yet have an overview of what is happening in schools and is committed to following up progress on disability equality.

The Welsh Assembly Government also produced guidance for all primary, secondary and special schools in Wales setting out suggestions and case studies of how disabled parents could be involved in the life of the school. It plans to review progress on implementation of changes arising from school Disability Equality Schemes in 2009.

There is currently no specific guidance produced by the Scottish Government for education authorities or schools on the Disability Equality Duty.

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<sup>25</sup> DRC (2006) *Schools and the Disability Equality Duty in England and Wales*

<sup>26</sup> DRC (2006) *Schools, Education and the Disability Equality Duty: A guide for education authorities and grant aided schools in Scotland*

<sup>27</sup> 2008 Secretary of State *Report on progress towards disability equality across the children's and education sector.*



### ***Parental involvement legislation and policy initiatives***

In **England** the significance of parenting in improving child outcomes has become increasingly central to policy formation on all family issues since the launch of *Every Child Matters*<sup>28</sup>. The Children Act 2004 provides the legal underpinning for parental involvement and a range of subsequent policy documents and initiatives<sup>29</sup> provide the framework for implementing policy into practice.

Parents are identified as having a key role to play in achieving and improving outcomes for all children and young people (be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, achieve economic well being). The Children's Plan<sup>30</sup> (2007) further emphasised the Government's commitment to improved information and support provision for parents through to 2010/11.

The current focus of parental involvement in education in England is parental engagement in their children's learning. The recent progress report on the Children's Plan<sup>31</sup> sets out what parents can expect from services to help them engage in their children's learning from pre-school to secondary education. This draws on a range of initiatives<sup>32</sup> that have been introduced to support parental engagement at all stages of children's lives.

In **Scotland** parental involvement policy has been drawn together through the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. This specifies that education authorities develop a parental involvement strategy. It also specifies that schools establish Parent Councils, improve the ways in which they support parents to develop their children's learning at home, and provide information to improve parental engagement with the school. This legislation obliged education authorities and schools to have regard to equal opportunities and disability legislation. So far, at least 90% of Scottish schools have established Parent Councils, and an infrastructure of local

<sup>28</sup> DfES (2004) *Every Child Matters*

<sup>29</sup> For example, The Childcare Act 2006, Sure Start Children's Centres, Extended Schools, Healthy Schools, Home School Agreements, Every Parent Matters, The National Academy for Parenting Practitioners, Parent Know How

<sup>30</sup> DCSF (2007) *The Children's Plan: details its ambitions for children and young people for the next decade*

<sup>31</sup> *The Children's Plan – A Progress Report 77* DCSF

<sup>32</sup> Bookstart, Sure Start Children's Centres, Transition Information Sessions for parents at primary and secondary schools, extended schools, parent choice advisers, parent support advisers, personal tutors for all secondary pupils and a new straightforward complaints procedure.

“ [In Northern Ireland], where parental involvement is mentioned, it is often alongside the need for greater community engagement as well. ”

authority parental involvement officers and national leads has been developed. Evidence on schools’ progress in developing learning at home and on parental engagement with schools will take longer to evolve.

In **Wales**, the Parenting Action Plan (2005)<sup>33</sup> set out the Welsh Assembly programme for parent participation and support. A guide for Children and Young People’s Partnerships was produced (2006)<sup>34</sup>, with the aim of supporting participation across service areas, including schools and local education authorities. The policy also committed the Welsh Assembly Government to work with education authorities, Estyn (the Welsh schools inspectorate) and school governing bodies to promote parental participation in schools.

As part of this strategy, the Welsh Assembly Government also wanted to see schools, especially in deprived areas, become ‘community focused’, encouraging parents back into learning to reinforce the value of education for whole families. The Parenting Action Plan ended in March 2008 and an Inquiry into what should happen next is ongoing.

In **Northern Ireland**, the Department of Education (DE) is currently undertaking a far-reaching review of children’s education. Following a consultation exercise early in 2008, the DE published a document entitled ‘Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement’<sup>35</sup> (ESaGS) in April 2009. This sets out overall policy, the key priorities being to raise standards and tackle underachievement among school pupils. Parental involvement – referred to as ‘parental engagement’ – is relatively ‘low key’ in this document and, while a number of areas are identified in which the DE intends to ‘bring forward policy development’, parental involvement is not one of them. Indeed, pupil engagement is presented as a greater priority and, where parental involvement is mentioned, it is often alongside the need for greater community engagement as well. This approach presumably reflects the

<sup>33</sup> *Supporting mothers, fathers and carers with raising children in Wales*, Department of Training and Education, Welsh Assembly Government, December 2005

<sup>34</sup> *Parent Participation: Practice guide for Children and Young People’s Partnerships*, Department of Training and Education, Welsh Assembly Government, September, 2006

<sup>35</sup> See [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools\\_impvt\\_prog\\_pg/03-every-school-a-good-school-a-policy-for-school-improvement.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools_impvt_prog_pg/03-every-school-a-good-school-a-policy-for-school-improvement.htm)

particular social and cultural context of Northern Ireland and suggests that parental involvement is starting off from a low baseline.

The rest of this section identifies and discusses a range of themes which have emerged from the policy analysis.

### ***An increasing role for parents in education at school and at home***

Although legal frameworks and policy initiatives vary across the four areas of the UK, the role of parents in the education of their children has become increasingly prioritised in education policy throughout Britain since the 1990s.

In all four parts of the UK parents are viewed as the primary educators and parental involvement in education is valued on the grounds that it benefits children and young people both academically and socially. There are, however, some differences in the way parental involvement is defined and in the focus of involvement.

In **England**, DCSF splits parental involvement in education into two broad strands:

- Parents' involvement in the life of the school
- Parents' involvement in support of the individual child at home (parental engagement).

It is explicitly stated that policy and resources focus on parental engagement because of the research evidence<sup>36</sup> that links parental engagement and educational achievement.

In **Scotland** the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 identifies three elements of parental involvement:

- Learning at home
- Home-school partnership
- Parental representation in a more formal way.

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<sup>36</sup> Desforges, C. and Abouchaar, A. (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review*. DfES Research Report 433.  
Harris, A. and Goodall, J. (2007) *Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement – Do Parents know they Matter?* DCSF Research Report. RW 004

Whilst parents engaging with their child's learning is central to Scottish policy, initial implementation of the Parental Involvement Act has focused on the formal representation of parents through Parents' Forums and Parent Councils.

**Wales** has a strong focus on parental involvement being inherently good for all services, including education. However the recently published review of the Parenting Action Plan<sup>37</sup> found that delivery of its commitment to promote parental participation in schools through working with LEAs, Estyn and school governing bodies was 'patchy'. It recommends that:

- The Welsh Assembly Government should provide clear, statutory guidance, giving direction to local authorities and schools about involving parents in schools, taking account of many parents' daytime working patterns.

This report also acknowledged that the 2005 Plan did not specify how disabled parents might be supported and recommends that the refreshed Action Plan should set out specific actions to provide support to particular parent groups, including disabled parents.

In **Northern Ireland**, the 'powerful influence' of parents and community on educational outcomes is recognised in ESaGS, as is the desire of many parents to support their children's education, sometimes hindered by uncertainty about how to do so. Schools should therefore become more welcoming to parents, make it easier for them to support their children's learning and provide regular feedback on progress. At the same time, parents are given a clear monitoring role in relation to their children's education – they should support schools to

*ensure that children attend school, approach their studies in a diligent fashion, co-operate with their teachers and other staff, complete their homework assignments and prepare adequately for school-based and external examinations (p 35).*<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Parenting in Wales and the delivery of the Parenting Action Plan*. National Assembly of Wales, Children and Young People's Committee. May 2009

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools\\_impvt\\_prog\\_pg/03-every-school-a-good-school-a-policy-for-school-improvement.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools_impvt_prog_pg/03-every-school-a-good-school-a-policy-for-school-improvement.htm)

“...disabled parents face specific inequalities and may benefit from targeted support, changes in practice or procedures, training, physical adaptations, independent advocacy, and so on.”

It is also stated that schools and teachers should be ‘held in respect’ by parents and the local community. Thus it seems that parental engagement policies in Northern Ireland are relatively narrowly focused on the individual family monitoring their child’s learning rather than encouraging parents to become involved in the wider life of the school or at a collective level.

### **Universal policies – targeted support**

Parental involvement policies in education in the four areas of the UK apply to all parents. However, previous research has shown that disabled parents face specific inequalities and may benefit from targeted support, changes in practice or procedures, training, physical adaptations, independent advocacy, and so on. Support also needs to take account of the needs of specific groups including those with learning disabilities, mental distress, physical impairments and sensory impairments.

This begs the question of how well disabled parents are likely to be served by universal parental involvement policies. In **Scotland**, the support materials for the Parental Involvement Act include checklists for schools which do make explicit reference to disabled parents.<sup>39</sup> In **Wales**, the Practice Guide for Children’s and Young People’s Partnerships makes several mentions of how to support involvement of disabled parents, and more specific information for schools is provided through the Welsh Assembly Government guidance for schools on their Disability Equality Schemes. In **England**, the Disability Equality Scheme guidance for schools provides the most explicit national guidance for schools on involving disabled parents, although this may be supported by other guidance produced at local authority level. We were unable to find any references to disabled parents in the Northern Ireland School Improvement programme.

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentsaspartnersinlearning/images/Toolkit\\_tcm4-373859.pdf](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentsaspartnersinlearning/images/Toolkit_tcm4-373859.pdf)

“ *The question of how schools and education authorities can best identify disabled parents is an important issue and key to providing support for involvement.* ”

### ***Individual focus versus general anticipatory duties***

Parental involvement policies in the four areas of the UK tend to be focused on the individual child and/or family. However, as already noted, the Disability Discrimination Act states that public authorities such as schools and education authorities should anticipate the needs of disabled parents in general. There is a potential tension between these differing emphases contained in education and disability legislation. It is perhaps too soon to assess how this may be played out in practice: however, it seems likely that more work is needed to understand how policies aimed at the individual and collective levels can best work together to support disabled parents to participate equally.

### ***Identification of disabled parents***

Schools and education authorities do not identify which of their parents are disabled. The question of how schools and education authorities can best identify disabled parents is an important issue and key to providing support for involvement. It raises concerns about how many parents will wish to disclose impairment and/or view themselves as ‘disabled’. However if schools are to fulfil their duties under the DDA and disabled parents are to be supported to be fully involved in their children’s education, this issue has to be addressed (as discussed in more detail later in this report).

### ***Parental involvement infrastructure***

The infrastructures of support for parental involvement across the four areas of the UK are at different stages of development. As a result of Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006, which places a duty on local authorities to provide parents with ‘information, advice and assistance’, local authorities in **England** have or are developing parental involvement strategies across children’s services including education. The accompanying guidance for local authorities



notes that Family Information Services must be accessible to disabled parents.<sup>40</sup> Within education authorities and schools, all parents should (by 2010) have access to ‘parent choice advisers’ to provide information on choices of school and ‘parent support advisers’ to support parents to be engaged in their child’s learning.

**Scotland** has provided strong support for schools to set up Parent Councils, and all local authorities are developing a Parental Involvement Strategy and have a Parental Involvement Officer. **Wales** has a network of Children and Young People’s Framework Partnerships (CYPP) which involve children, young people and families in how services for children and young people are delivered locally. Some CYPPs have set up Parent Networks.

As noted above, new policy initiatives in **Northern Ireland** identify a need to develop ‘parental engagement’ but little detail is provided on how this will be achieved. This is interesting given that responses to an earlier consultation document noted that parental involvement was ‘rather light on detail’<sup>41</sup> and lacked plans to empower parents. A suggestion that a Parents Forum be established has not apparently been pursued (although the Policy Implementation Plan sets out proposals to set up Pupil Councils).

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/\\_files/221012DCSFinfassgweb.pdf](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/221012DCSFinfassgweb.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools\\_impvt\\_prog\\_pg/03-every-school-a-good-school-a-policy-for-school-improvement.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/03-schools_impvt_prog_pg/03-every-school-a-good-school-a-policy-for-school-improvement.htm)

<sup>42</sup> 14 October 2008, the Secretary of State announced his intention to improve how schools’ performance is reported to parents, communities and other stakeholders, providing clear and comprehensive information in a new School Report Card.

### ***Monitoring of parental involvement policies***

In both Scotland and England there is some evidence that parental involvement is gaining a higher profile within the school inspection process.

In **Scotland**, HMIE have a remit to include the views of parents in their inspections of schools. Currently in **England**, Ofsted inspections also include parents’ views on certain aspects of the school. A new policy initiative, School Report Cards,<sup>42</sup> is likely to introduce systematic reporting on parents’ views about how well the school engages them in their child’s



“ *...the role of parents has become increasingly prioritised in education policy throughout Britain since the 1990s.* ”

education and development. In Wales, the Equality and Human Rights Division of the Welsh Assembly Government is considering ways to evaluate schools' progress on the Disability Equality Duty. Estyn may also play a stronger role in monitoring parental involvement, including disabled parents' involvement, from 2009/10.

It is likely that HMIE and Ofsted will have a role in monitoring disabled parents' involvement in their children's education in **Scotland** and **England** respectively, as part of their own Disability Equality Scheme obligations. It is interesting to note that both HMIE and Ofsted cite special schools for children with additional support needs as offering evidence of good practice in parental involvement/engagement. In **Northern Ireland**, progress towards meeting the targets set out in the ESaGS policy will be reviewed by the DE Board and the DE Audit and Risk Management Committee. Annual progress reports will be published on the DE website. However, the specific targets to be measured centre on raising pupil attainment and improving educational outcomes rather than promoting parental involvement.

### **Summary**

While legal frameworks, policy initiatives and parental involvement infrastructures vary across **England, Scotland, Wales** and **Northern Ireland** the role of parents has become increasingly prioritised in education policy throughout Britain since the 1990s. It is promoted throughout the four jurisdictions, with differing emphasis, in three areas: in the individual child's learning; in the life of the school; and on formal representative bodies.

Parental involvement legislation applies to all parents and although it makes no specific reference to disabled parents it has to be implemented in accordance with both the general and specific duties in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

Although currently there are no systematic mechanisms in place to monitor disabled parents' involvement, the increased profile of parental involvement within school inspection processes (HMIE, Ofsted, Estyn) coupled with the agencies' own obligations under the DDA highlights the potential of inspection agencies to undertake this task.

### 3. Key informant interviews

This section begins with an overview of current parental involvement policies in terms of their rationale, direction, focus, tensions and impact. This is followed by a summary of the issues that emerged when our respondents specifically considered disabled parents' involvement in their children's education.

#### *Parental involvement policy*

“...it has been suggested that parental involvement can have a positive impact on school policies, the aims of the Curriculum for Excellence and the child outcomes contained in *Every Child Matters*.”

While definitions of parental involvement differ and policy initiatives vary across the United Kingdom, the rationale behind parental involvement policy and its intended direction are consistent. The focus of current policy in England is parental engagement because of the research evidence supporting its impact on attainment. Similarly in Scotland, while the initial implementation of the Parental Involvement Act was concerned with the formal representation of parents through Parent Councils, there is now a political push to shift the emphasis to parental involvement in their children's learning. In addition to its impact on attainment, it has been suggested that parental involvement can have a positive impact on school policies, the aims of the Curriculum for Excellence and the child outcomes contained in *Every Child Matters*.

Policy makers in England and Scotland do however have a different perspective on the role and impact of parental involvement in the life of schools. In England, policy makers have moved away from parental involvement in the life of schools whereas in Scotland it is anticipated that the new Parent Councils have a role to play in encouraging the wider parent body to engage in their children's learning. This role for Parent Councils is not supported by the former national body of the former PTAs, the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC), which is highly critical of the Government's focus on parental involvement to raise attainment. Interestingly,

**“ ...social marketing be used to shift parental attitudes to parental engagement although it was acknowledged that this might be difficult politically. ”**

the national body for PTAs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the National Council of Parent Teacher Associations (NCPTA), is critical of the distinction drawn between school involvement and parental engagement. Its view (supported by some head teachers) is that parental involvement with the school enhances opportunities for parents to engage in their children’s learning.

In England the current focus is to increase parental involvement at secondary school level; specific measures include parent choice advisers, parent support advisers, personal tutors for pupils and online live information for parents on their child’s progress. The NCPTA, while acknowledging the importance of maintaining parental engagement throughout children’s school lives, questions the wisdom of this, suggesting that if parents are not engaged by the time their children reach secondary school then it may be too late. The SPTC questions whether it is good for children to have parents so engaged in their school lives, particularly in adolescence: its view is that school should offer children and young people an opportunity to develop independently from their parents and, conversely, that home should not be an extension of school.

There was general agreement among key informants that while policies were beginning to impact on school practices, parental engagement/involvement was not yet embedded across England or Scotland. Policy makers in Scotland and England identified three key factors to facilitate this process: firstly, to raise the profile of parental engagement in the inspection process; secondly, to provide input to Initial Teacher Education and CPD on the importance of parental involvement and thirdly, the dissemination of good practice. In addition, policy makers in England also suggested that social marketing be used to shift parental attitudes to parental engagement although it was acknowledged that this might be difficult politically.

### ***Disabled parents' involvement***

No organisation interviewed reported disabled parents' involvement or non-involvement in their children's education as an issue that had been brought to their attention. The Disabled Parents Network (DPN) made the point that disabled parents are an invisible group. They reported that disabled parents can experience difficulties at any stage of their involvement in their children's education, reiterating Morris's (2004) analysis which specifies that these difficulties are created by two main barriers: unhelpful or negative attitudes and a failure to make buildings and communication accessible.

***“ ...if a disabled parent is identified as needing support to be involved in their children's education then those needs are addressed on an individual, case by case basis. ”***

Parental involvement legislation and policy initiatives in both England and Scotland were described as being inclusive of all parents. While there is no specific reference to disabled parents within parental involvement policies there is awareness that these have to be read and implemented in the light of both the general and specific duties in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

Parental involvement policies and accompanying guidance for their implementation do encourage education authorities and schools to think about the barriers that might exist for individual parents across a wide range of family circumstances but they do not specify disabled parents or the particular barriers they might face. (This contrasts with other parent groups, such as lone parents, fathers and travelling people who are specified in various initiatives.)

The focus of parental involvement policies is on the individual child and family's circumstances; if a disabled parent is identified as needing support to be involved in their children's education then those needs are addressed on an individual, case by case basis. It would appear from the few examples of disabled parents' involvement reported that the onus lies with disabled parents to identify themselves.

Education authorities and schools were unaware of how many disabled parents they had. (However, there was growing awareness of young carers and their support needs.) There was general agreement that disclosure of impairment was a complex and sensitive issues for parents, particularly for those with mental distress and/or learning disabilities.

Disabled parents, as a specific group, had not been involved in consultations on parental involvement policies. There are no processes at present to consider how the support needs of different impairment groups might be met nor is there any specific funding to support disabled parents' participation in their children's education.

There is no monitoring of disabled parents' participation in their children's education at national, education authority or school level. It was recognised that the increased profile of parental involvement in the inspection process, in both England and Scotland, offered an opportunity to address this.

There was some discussion at national and local policy level in Scotland as to what legislation best supports disabled parents to be involved in their children's education. It was suggested that the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (currently under review) would be best because its focus is on the child and there is more evidence of joined-up working across services to meet the needs of the child. This was supported by evidence from HMIE and English policy makers identifying good practice in parental involvement in special schools because of this focus on the individual needs of the child.

The lack of joined-up working between adult and children's services was identified as a barrier to disabled parents' involvement by parenting organisations in England.

**“ An analysis of the key informant interviews confirms the findings from the policy analysis that parental involvement policies across the four jurisdictions are universal ones. ”**

### **Summary**

An analysis of the key informant interviews confirms the findings from the policy analysis that parental involvement policies across the four jurisdictions are universal ones. However there was support for more specific measures to ensure such policies were inclusive of disabled parents. Policy makers suggested that consideration be given to: mechanisms for identifying disabled parents; the barriers faced by disabled parents; the interface between disability, inclusive education and parental involvement legislation; and the provision of training materials on disabled parents' involvement for head teachers, initial teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD).

**“ The parents in our study were a diverse group and their stories reflect both their diversity and the variation within their children’s educational placements and experiences. ”**

#### 4. Case studies

Twenty-four parents told us about their good experiences of being involved in their children’s education. Additional information was provided by a number of professionals, identified by parents as being particularly supportive of their involvement. The parents in our study were a diverse group and their stories reflect both their diversity and the variation within their children’s educational placements and experiences. Nonetheless qualitative analysis of the parent interview data identified a number of themes that have implications for policy and practice in terms of disabled parents’ involvement in their children’s education. These themes, listed below, form the basis of the guidance document which accompanies this report.

- Parental involvement across the three dimensions: in the individual child’s learning; in the life of the school; and on representatives bodies;
- Support to facilitate involvement: generic, individual, anticipatory and multi-agency;
- Communication: accessible, consistent, informal, direct;
- School issues: leadership, ethos, attitude, training, curriculum;
- Disclosure issues.

Analysis also showed that some issues had heightened significance for particular groups – parents whose children had additional support needs, parents with mental distress and those with learning disabilities. These are highlighted where appropriate.

In this section we give a voice to disabled parents’ perspectives on and experiences of current parental involvement policies. We give consideration to the different ways they have been involved; the different types of support



they received and the good practice factors common to their stories. Their views and concerns on disclosure issues are also presented.

### ***Perspectives on parental involvement***

Disabled parents felt that there had been significant improvements in parental involvement in schools over the years. While there were differences in the nature and intensity of their own involvement, most parents were aware of recent policy changes around parental engagement, with many commenting that this increase in parental involvement was beneficial to all concerned, child, parent and school. One parent spoke of it as a triangle:

***'I say it's a triangular thing with parent, school and student and that triangle has to work for all.'*** Parent 7

Another parent contrasted the experience of parental involvement when she was a child with her present involvement as a parent, describing how the latter works to improve the school experience both of the child and parent:

***'I think there's a lot of changes in parents helping with the schoolchildren. I think it's good for the children and it's good for the parents because if they've got any problems then they can speak to the teacher.... I didn't have this support from my mum and dad when I went to school and I think it's, it's really good to get parents involved in the school because it lets you see how your child is progressing in school you know if they've got any problems it's not just you... it breaks down the barriers that you know, you've got your teacher and you've got your parent and you've got your child and your child's dealing with the teacher all the time. So the teacher sometimes knows how your child works and the parent knows how the child works too because obviously it's the parent, so to combine the parent and teacher together to***

***help the child progress and, you know, have a happy life at school.'***

The importance of parental involvement was echoed by the professionals interviewed. One head teacher explained how valuing parental input was an essential element of her school's strategy:

***'Making the parent really a valuable contributor, for example, I would say we've tried loads and loads of things with [child] and we're not really working here the right way but you seem to be able to do it at home, what do you do that you could advise us, and following it through.'***

Many parents commented on the significance of parental involvement for disabled parents in general in addition to the impact of their own individual involvement. It was suggested that parental involvement was more important for disabled than non-disabled parents because disabled people in society had fewer opportunities to participate in and contribute to the social life of their community:

***'It is very, very important... as a disabled person you lose so much control over your life that to be able to still feel like a parent and still be able to do things in the school. You know I mean I want to do this volunteering, to be involved in school I think it's really important, more important because you've not got other avenues to feel useful because you've got to feel useful to your children.'***

Another parent, emphasising the importance of parental input to children's education, stressed that it was more difficult for disabled parents to be involved:

***'I think a parent though has so much impact on their child's education you have to be a part and if you have like a disability then it is much harder to battle I think.'***

Some parents highlighted how their experience had led to increased confidence and enhanced their social life. One parent in a rural community commented:

***'It's built my self-esteem up a wee bit because I've been like, oh I'm no' going tae school, you know, they'll think I'm thick and things like that... but they've made me because it's, how can I describe it, it gives me something to do you know instead of sitting in the house all the time... I don't go out very often because of the (impairment), it's not a barrier it's just I dinnae, how can you describe it, it's like I will go out but it's not like years before when I went out, I was up on the dance floor and walking about and things like that whereas now I'm like oh I cannae dance now, I cannae dance so it's like well I need other interests.'***

Another explained how her confidence had grown through being involved in the SPTC and the school parent council:

***'But also it gave me the confidence to actually, well I am going to question this (head teacher or policy) or maybe somebody else on the directors is, maybe at another school has got a way of working that, oh well I could take that back to the parent council, see what they think and they maybe take it back and they go oh yes, never thought on it that way you know, things like that. Whereas back then I didn't have that confidence to do it because I was still a case of kowtow to the headmistress, their words was God. Now because I've been involved in the parents' association, parent councils it's a case of excuse me I don't agree with your policy, do you think we can have a wee look at it. I'm more confident in doing it that way.'***

### ***Parental involvement: disabled parents' experiences***

Some parents were very involved in their children's education, their accounts encompassing involvement in their own child's learning, the life of the school and representation on formal

“...specific incidents of good (and not so good) practice were more likely to be reported by parents with sensory impairments and parents with learning disabilities.”

bodies. For others, mostly parents of children with additional support needs, the focus of their story centred solely on their own child’s learning. Not surprisingly, for some of these parents a decrease in direct involvement with their child’s education was viewed as the successful outcome of their good story. The ‘good’ stories of a minority of parents with learning disabilities revealed a much lower level of involvement with their child’s education than the other respondents in our study. While the reasons may be complex, this supports other research which has suggested that some people with learning disabilities have relatively low expectations of services.

### ***Involvement in their individual child’s learning***

Disabled parents welcomed information about what their children were learning at school and how to help them learn at home, although some found the pressure to help with homework problematic.

While most parents valued accessible information, specific incidents of good (and not so good) practice were more likely to be reported by parents with sensory impairments and parents with learning disabilities. Parents with sensory impairments highlighted the need to have information consistently sent home in accessible formats. The experiences of parents with visual impairments varied, most having had very positive experiences, for example, large print, raised formats and Braille labelling. However one parent reported a poor response to her request for larger print: ***‘They never come home like say that size plus bigger format and they never ever do, they’re always little.’***

Parents with learning disabilities found it very helpful to be given information orally and also appreciated teachers spending extra time with them at parents’ nights. Parents with sensory impairments and those with mental distress also commented on the benefits of teachers taking ‘just a wee bit more time to explain things’.

Those disabled parents who found homework problematic (for various reasons) identified homework clubs as a solution to this difficulty and praised schools for their commitment to supporting this. A parent with a mobility impairment explained:

***'I have a problem, and it's because of my energy levels, and that's homework. You know it's being involved in your children's homework but everybody has to do these days [laughs] and I can't do it, I mean I just, if we're just sitting at the dining table for an hour it takes a lot out of me... it's hard parenting... but I have to say that school do try to offer alternative solutions, like... homework club.'***

Another parent with mental distress commented:

***'With homework and things, it can be difficult at times; it depends on how well I am. So there are homework clubs that [child] has had access to as well you know and the school encouraged her to go... they do try.'***

Disabled parents also singled out pupil, parent and family support groups as positive examples of parental involvement. While parents had taken part in different types of groups, (for example, one parent had been in a family focus group supporting pupils during the transition from primary to secondary school; another was in a parent and child learning group while parents of children with additional support needs were in parent-only support groups), all reported this service as being beneficial to both them and their children. For some parents, participation in a group had a long-lasting impact. One parent who had initially become involved in a group because of her child's transition difficulties was invited to stay on to lead the group after her own child's difficulties were resolved. As a consequence, the parent's confidence had grown and she was increasingly taking advantage of the further educational opportunities offered through her child's school.

Staff also recognised how generic provision had supported disabled parents. One school, through extended school services, had dedicated staff members, 'learning mentors', to work with families and were aware that this had proved very helpful to a parent with learning disabilities. A professional explained how knowing of a parent's learning disability resulted in staff spending a bit more time with her child and encouraged the girl to make use of homework clubs:

***'It's just that making sure that staff just spend that little bit more time explaining the homework to [child] as opposed to somebody who might go home and their parents do it. So it's just ensuring that staff are aware of that. Staff are aware of all of our students who have some kind of literacy problems or you know problems academically. We do also have, as you say, a homework club which is on every night which [child] is aware of, she has accessed that from time to time where you just go in and that is staffed by learning managers who are there who will also just give her that little bit more assistance.'***

He highlighted how a policy of staff accessibility for all parents facilitated involvement:

***'School has non-teaching pastoral care staff who are always available for parents. So I am available for parents if parents just pop in which a lot of our parents do. So it's kind of you know having that inclusion so if a parent like [ ] who often gets herself you know kind of wound up about something and sadly can't wait till three o'clock in the afternoon you know she needs to deal with it now, can come in and see me straight away and that is the way as a school that we're going, so inclusion is very, very good.'***

Many disabled parents also commented that it was easier to be involved if teachers and the head teacher were readily accessible informally, for example in the playground before and after school.

In addition to providing generic forms of support to enable disabled parents to be involved in their children's education, schools had also provided support to reflect the specific needs of individual disabled parents. Various accounts of schools making individual adjustments were reported to us. Some examples apropos parents' involvement in their individual child's learning are given below.

A parent with learning disabilities who was very anxious when her first child started school recounted how the school allowed her to sit in with her child to alleviate her anxiety. This had a lasting positive impact on her relationship with that particular school and her children's subsequent schools.

A blind parent suggested how schools could give blind and visually impaired parents specific extra support to manage their child's visible behaviours. She explained how her childminder supported her to parent and anticipated schools being able to do the same:

***'... so anyway I said to [childminder] I said right when she's at playgroup if she does something that's not acceptable you need to ask her to come to you to tell her off because I couldn't tell her off from a distance. Exactly the same, yes and the other thing I say to her as well is you know never let her walk on her own. You know the way you would let your child walk in front of you on the pavement, well I can't do that so I say to [childminder] you know try and get her to walk with one of the other children holding hands or and the other thing that I'm actually asking her to help me with as well is when [child], when [child] is told off she doesn't look at anyone, she kind of turns away and walks off because obviously I can't see her turning away. So [childminder] will say things like look at me please when I'm talking to you, you know things like that.'***



A member of staff at the school attended by the child of another visually impaired parent detailed some of the adjustments made:

***'The other thing is if we've had a production on, make sure [parent's] got a front seat so she can, so she could see, so she had nothing blocking her view... actually one of the things was making sure that the colours we used as well, if we sent homework home, that we didn't use certain colours.'***

Parents also reported how schools responded to the needs of their children when they were worried about the fluctuating health of their parent(s). While the particular support varied dependent on the needs of the child and the particular circumstances of the parent, the general thrust of support was to ensure that school was a place of security and stability where the child could freely express their concerns. Examples included the provision of a holiday support club for a child whose mother was experiencing a crisis in mental health; supportive discussions with a teenager who was concerned over his mum's fluctuating health; a referral to a young carers organisation for a child who was having difficulties coming to terms with effects of her mother's impairment and a relaxation of academic expectation for a child whose mum was critically ill. The head teacher in this last example explained how her school responded to the change in family circumstances:

***'To be honest our concern was that he was happy and content and he was learning you know and he was secure in this environment you know and school. Actually I think maybe it helped him, his coming to school helped him go through this because he was secure here, he came in, he was with friends, he knew that everybody was looking out for him.'***

### ***Parental involvement in the life of the school***

Many of our parents' stories centred on very good experiences of volunteering in schools. The common factors underlying their stories focused on staff who had demonstrated a flexible, open, proactive and positive approach to involving parents in their schools. Again, schools had made reasonable adjustments to reflect the individual needs of the parent.

For example, a parent who was a wheelchair user informed us how she had been encouraged to volunteer and the adjustment made to enable her to do so:

***'They've been encouraging for me to be involved and do things... They've... adapted what, how they've done their structured play so that it can accommodate me as a parent helper. I can get into the classroom and around and whatever so it's, do you know it's fine and normally what would happen is the parent helper would be down in structured play and swap about a classroom and structured play. Now because obviously structured play is down three stairs they're happy that the other person just stayed, the other person who is in, their student or parent helper at the same time, the other person is down in structured play and I'm up doing the craft activities and things like that with the class.'***

She went on to explain further how the school's proactive approach amounted to more than non-discrimination: it was positively encouraging:

***'I don't expect the school to make special allowances for me being disabled but I just don't expect any obstructions either and the school are very good at that, there is no obstructions... but it's more than just the absence of negative, they encouraged me... to be involved.'***

Some schools made sure that events (e.g. award ceremonies, school concerts) held off school premises were equally accessible to all parents. One parent with a mobility impairment described how her son's school had made an adjustment:

***'He (son) just lets them know that I have a ticket, how many people I'm bringing with me and those seats are reserved so there's one left for my wheelchair because I have to use a wheelchair now.'***

and also how at other events outside of schools:

***'Again the city hall for things like presentation evenings and carol services and again he just mentions at college that I will be there and I need a wheelchair space and they ring me with instructions as to how to get into the building and if they think it's going to be clearly signposted and make sure that there is a wheel space, a wheelchair space just for me.'***

### ***Involvement on representative bodies***

Several parents reported schools had actively encouraged them to become involved in Parent Councils and Governing Boards. A common feature of many of these stories was a supportive head teacher. For example, a father highlighted how the proactive approach of the head teacher facilitated his involvement:

***'I was on for about four years as a board governor. I found the whole thing to be very positive actually because the head teacher was very, very good and he was very proactive and very enthusiastic particularly to have you know a visually impaired parent governor on board. So I've found my involvement within the board quite good as well because I was obviously given the opportunity to be active on the board and involved at all levels of discussion.'***

However, parents were aware that these bodies could do more to include disabled parents and made several suggestions. These included ensuring that all information is set out in accessible formats and is sent out in advance so that parents can plan ahead; increased flexibility of meeting times, perhaps alternating between daytime and evening meetings; and the need for representative bodies to recognise that some parents will need support to become involved and stay involved.

### ***Support from external agencies***

Parents also cited examples of external support agencies that had been helpful to their involvement in their children's education e.g. social work, carers, young carers groups and parent/family support groups. A parent recounted how her social worker had been invaluable in supporting her struggle to get a placement change for her daughter who had additional support needs. For another parent, employing a personal assistant (PA) empowered her in a way that her previous arrangement of carers for personal needs had not. It was clear to her son that the personal assistant was an extension of his mother – *he looks to her as his mum's extra pair of hands*. Help with domestic tasks during periods of mental distress has enabled a disabled parent to keep her family together thus ensuring the mother's continued involvement in her children's education:

***'Yes, aha quite a lot of help with the house, and with the children, yes which has kept us together I must admit.'***

The importance of multi-agency support was echoed by a head teacher of a large inclusive primary school:

***'I mean one of the other good things I suppose is that we try to do you know what is kind of bandied around is joined-up working, we try to involve all the agencies and make sure that we're communicating with health and***

***“ Parents also cited examples of external support agencies that had been helpful to their involvement in their children's education e.g. social work, carers, young carers groups and parent/family support groups. ”***

***social work and psychological services et cetera whether it be about the child or if there's issues concerning the parent.'***

Underlying the different kinds of support provision reported by our diverse group of parents was a primary focus on the needs of the individual child, including the particular circumstances of the family. No parent reported that their child's school or local education authority had policies or practices in place to specifically support disabled parents to be involved in their child's education. This is consistent with the earlier findings from our policy review and key informant interviews supporting evidence of a tension between the individual focus of parental involvement policy and the anticipatory duty of disability legislation. However there was some evidence that schools are making some anticipatory adjustments, mostly related to physical accessibility. Some examples are detailed below.

***Anticipatory adjustments***

Parents' accounts of anticipatory adjustments concerning physical accessibility were often told in relation to what had gone before. For example they compared new-build schools to older schools and found physical accessibility much improved:

***'We've got the new school. I went on a visit there last week and it was absolutely superb. They've thought about things like lighting, acoustics, I mean the works, and it's actually a pleasure. They've got automatic doors and things like this, very easily moveable furniture. I mean everything has been designed so that a disabled child, disabled parent has got total access to every part of the building.'***

Similarly a parent compared her experience at her children's former and current schools but in this case it was the school's

thinking on physical accessibility, rather than the actual building structure, that was different. She explained how the way in which schools considered furniture layout made a difference:

***‘Getting around things is much easier here than in the old school. When they’re putting the furniture out they think about the fact that there’s going to be a wheelchair coming in whereas at the old school they always, always had to move the furniture around. I mean I wasn’t the only wheelchair-using one there but they just couldn’t seem to get it into the school’s consciousness whereas here it’s just gone straight in.’***

Evidence of anticipatory adjustment was also evident at local education authority level. One parent who was very active in a disabled persons’ group reported that her local education authority supported the group to carry out accessibility audits of school buildings, including new-builds.

Parents suggested schools and local education authorities should think about anticipatory adjustments in a more systematic way. Some parents had given a lot of thought to the support they required to be equally involved throughout their children’s education. One parent, while making specific suggestions apropos adjustments for visually impaired parents, considered that they might equally apply to all disabled parents. She explained how this kind of adjustment would enable her to choose a nursery or school for her child in the same way a sighted parent might:

***‘But I think it’s probably beneficial for every kind of disability to have that opportunity to actually walk round the nursery or a primary school, whatever, when there are no children in it because you need to get orientated and you need to be able to know whether you can get through with your guide dog or whether you can fit your wheelchair through doors and you don’t want to***

*be discovering that when there's a load of children in the building.'*

### **Other good practice features**

In addition to the generic support provision and anticipatory and individual adjustments outlined above, elements of good practice that consistently featured in our parents' stories related to communication and inclusive school ethos.

### **Communication**

Parents identified good communication between school and parents as a necessary condition of successful parental involvement: 'the key to getting on well with the school is communication' said one. Analysis indicated that good communication was dependent on it being accessible, consistent, informal and direct.

All communication to parents should be in formats that are accessible to them individually; schools can identify appropriate formats by talking to parents about their preferred means of communication. Schools also have to consider the timing of communications; some disabled parents may need more time to process information and/or to respond to its content, for example, helping with homework or providing resources for activities.

Many parents had poor experiences communicating with schools as well as good ones. Increased consistency would help overcome some of these difficulties. Therefore schools should endeavour to ensure that all information is consistently given to parents in accessible formats; that all staff involved with a disabled parent are aware of their individual communication support needs and that provision is made to sustain support.

An informal atmosphere within a school made it easier for parents to approach teachers with concerns and this enhanced



**“ Parents stressed that schools should always communicate directly with the parent not via their children, carer or personal assistant. ”**

communication between school and home. This was further enhanced if senior management and/or pastoral care staff were easily available for parents. The stress of formal meetings about their individual children (particularly experienced by parents of children with additional support needs and parents with mental distress) could be reduced for all parents by schools being flexible about time and venue, conducting meetings more informally, keeping meetings as small as possible and making sure that the parent has support to participate fully.

Parents stressed that schools should always communicate directly with the parent not via their children, carer or personal assistant.

### **Inclusive ethos**

Disabled parents' participation was facilitated by schools with an informed, receptive head teacher, increased awareness of disability issues, an explicit commitment to inclusion and dedicated parental liaison staff.

Parents commented not only on the part played by an individual head teacher in their own accounts of positive experience but, more generally, on the crucial role of head teachers in promoting an inclusive ethos. At the same time it was recognised that the attitudes and awareness of everyone in the school were important.

The data from the interviews with professionals indicated that many schools had provided regular in-service training related to disability awareness and that had helped to promote inclusive practice. There was general agreement among parents that increased training was the best way to overcome attitudinal barriers. In addition to disability equality training being essential for all school staff it was suggested that disability equality training should be included in initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development. They also recommended disabled people's organisations

**“ There was general agreement among parents that increased training was the best way to overcome attitudinal barriers. ”**

should deliver training for schools and universities. They were similarly in favour of disabled people’s organisations providing curricular input for children and young people.

Professionals and parents from schools with additional support units attached suggested that their schools’ explicit and visible commitment to inclusion and diversity more easily promoted and supported disabled parents’ involvement.

Some disabled parents thought that having one member of staff to coordinate support for disabled parents, including disclosure and staff training, would be useful. While no school appeared to dedicate staff to these specific tasks, many of the professionals interviewed reported dedicated parental involvement staff as a contributory factor to their good practice in involving disabled parents.

### **Disclosure**

Schools do have a duty to make anticipatory adjustments to help disabled parents in general and also, as evidenced by our parents’ experiences, they do make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of individual parents. Schools can do this more effectively if they are aware which of their parents are disabled.

As previously noted, at present the onus to disclose impairment rests with the parent and this can lead to stress as they have to choose the right moment and person to disclose to. While most of our parents had informed the schools about their impairment many expressed concern about disclosure, particularly those experiencing mental distress. Reasons for this included fear of discrimination, concern over how the information might be used and worry about the potential impact on their child’s education. However, it is important to note that parents were firmly in favour of schools becoming more proactive about disclosure and our case studies offer some insights as to how schools might begin to address this sensitive issue.

Firstly schools do have to be aware that disclosure of impairment might be problematic for parents: therefore disclosure should be voluntary and handled sensitively. For most parents, a relationship of trust with the school was a necessary precursor to disclosure: therefore schools have to actively welcome disabled parents. It was suggested that schools could become 'disclosure friendly' by making it clear at all school events, including induction and enrolment, that they encourage and support all parents, specifically including disabled parents.

**“ It was recommended that schools should provide parents with details of support available.... ”**

The majority of parents in our study reported that they were more likely to disclose impairments if they believed it would result in support that would enable them in turn to better support their individual child's education. It was recommended that schools should provide parents with details of support available and make it clear to parents that information from parents would be acted upon.

Parents offered workable ways for schools to enquire about support needs. They suggested that schools could ask parents a general question about parental support needs and preferred method of communication upon enrolment. This could then be updated as part of the general contact data annually required of parents and the most recent relevant information would move with the child through their educational journey.

“ *Increased disability awareness training was identified as the key to overcoming attitudinal barriers.* ”

### **Summary**

Disabled parents generally viewed parental involvement in their children’s education as very important and of benefit to their child. A diverse group, their involvement varied both in nature and intensity as does that of the universal population of parents. The types of support mechanisms identified as helpful by disabled parents reflect the universal nature yet individual focus of parental involvement policies. It was suggested that schools could more effectively make anticipatory and individual adjustments for disabled parents if they adopted a more proactive approach to identifying disabled parents and their support needs. Increased disability awareness training was identified as the key to overcoming attitudinal barriers.

## Implications for policy and practice

This section presents a summary of the most significant findings that have implications for policy and practice. A more detailed account of how policy makers and practitioners might begin to address the issues raised is given in the guidance document that accompanies this report.

### Universal policy – target and specify disabled parents?

**“ Our study suggests that consideration should be given to specifically including disabled parents at policy level rather than assuming that universal policies will necessarily prove to be inclusive. ”**

Parental involvement legislation throughout the United Kingdom applies to all parents and while individual policies and accompanying guidance encourage education authorities and schools to think about the barriers that might exist for individual parents across a wide range of family circumstances they do not specify disabled parents or the particular barriers they might face. Our study suggests that consideration should be given to specifically including disabled parents at policy level rather than assuming that universal policies will necessarily prove to be inclusive. Inclusion may be best achieved by sensitive targeted measures.

There are currently no mechanisms to monitor or evaluate disabled parents' involvement in their children's education. This gap could be addressed by a consideration of the systematic monitoring of disabled parents' involvement at all levels. The increasing profile of parental involvement in inspection processes throughout the United Kingdom, at both national and local authority level, coupled with authorities' and agencies' own obligations under the DDA provide a timely opportunity for action.

## **Disclosure – a proactive process**

Disabled parents are not a visible group: therefore consideration has to be given to ways of identifying them. At present the onus to disclose lies with them. However parents, policy makers and practitioners were all in favour of schools taking a more proactive approach to disclosure as long as it was voluntary and handled sensitively. Disabled parents are more likely to disclose if they believe that it will lead to support that will benefit their child's education. Schools need to find a non-stigmatising way of asking parents what their support needs are.

## **Training – the key to overcoming attitudinal barriers**

Education authorities had given separate input to schools on responsibilities and duties under the DDA and parental involvement legislation and policies. There was support for more specific guidance and input on the interface between all legislation that impacts on disabled parents' involvement.

Disability awareness training for all school staff, and input for pupils and the wider community were identified as effective ways of overcoming attitudinal barriers experienced by disabled people, particularly those with mental distress. Parents recommended that disability organisations be involved in delivering the training. Such training would help schools to think about disabled parents as a diverse group, including those with learning disabilities and mental distress as well as those with more visible sensory and physical impairments.

There was support for disability awareness and generic parental involvement training for initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) courses.

**“ Disabled parents of children with additional support needs often find formal meetings about their children’s education very stressful. ”**

### **Schools – inclusive, accessible, approachable, informal**

Our study shows that an inclusive ethos, a supportive and accessible head teacher, appropriate generic support and flexible structures coupled with positive and informed attitudes promote the equal involvement of disabled parents.

All home-school communications to parents should be in formats that are accessible to them individually and all staff involved with a disabled parent should be aware of their individual communication support needs.

Schools that present an informal, flexible and accessible atmosphere facilitate the involvement of disabled parents. Parents with learning disabilities and those experiencing mental distress particularly welcomed verbal communication and a personal contact at the school.

Disabled parents of children with additional support needs often find formal meetings about their children’s education very stressful. Schools can minimise this by keeping meetings as informal as possible, providing parents with adequate information in accessible formats and being flexible about meeting times.

Our study indicates that while disabled parents benefit from anticipatory adjustments their individual circumstances differ. Schools can provide the right initial support by communicating with the individual parent and can then plan how to anticipate and address future barriers.

### **Dedicated parental involvement staff**

This research found that the presence of dedicated parental involvement staff, whether it is via national initiatives – for example the extended schools programme – or individual education authority or school initiatives, enhances disabled parents’ involvement. Not all schools have these posts, and



some schools indicated that funding for them was being withdrawn.

“ *...there is a need for further research to look at the ways adult and children’s services might come together to better support families to meet the policy aim....* ”

### The future

At present schools and education authorities are unaware of the number of disabled parents they have although there is some evidence that they have some knowledge of numbers of young carers. As schools become more aware of the presence of disabled parents they will also become more aware of the types of support necessary and available to involve them equally. This may have resource implications for both schools and education authorities but it may also encourage more multi-agency working to support families. Our study suggests there is a need for further research to look at the ways adult and children’s services might come together to better support families to meet the policy aim, consistent across the United Kingdom, of improving outcomes for children.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Key Informant Topic Guide

NB: This topic guide is given as an example. Each guide was tailored as appropriate for the responding organisation but they all covered similar topics.

#### **Strathclyde University Study: Disabled parents' participation in their children's education: an examination of good practice**

##### ***Interview Schedule: National Policy Makers Scotland***

*Begin with brief reminder about study. Remind participant that interview will be recorded.*

##### ***Proposed Topic Guide***

##### **Policy formulation on parental participation**

What do you understand by parental involvement?

Why, in your view, is parental involvement important?

How well do you think current policies around parental involvement are working?

What, in your view, should the next steps be?

What is your understanding of how the legislation supports disabled parents' participation in their children's education?

Scotland – While the toolkit for implementation of the Act asks EAs and schools to consider how to involve disabled parents in their children's education, current policy (and guidance) doesn't specify how EAs and schools should support disabled parents. Why is this?

Were disabled parents consulted on the PI Act?

Do you aim for representative participation from different impairment groups, e.g. parents with sensory impairments, learning disabilities, mental health problems, mobility problems?

How are parents in general and disabled parents in particular involved in shaping education policy?

How are parents trained and supported to make sure that their involvement in policy making is informed and sustained? (how is it funded, what agencies are involved, how is training delivered etc)

### **Resources**

What are (have been) the resource implications of implementing the PI policy to enable disabled parents to participate? (including costs of supporting disabled parents, materials in different formats, interpreters etc)

Who pays for it?

Were/are education authorities given additional funding?

Is it ring fenced in any way for supporting disabled parents?

### **Implementation and Impact**

What procedures are in place for monitoring the implementation of the legislation? (PI act or equivalent)?

How is it being monitored in terms of its impact on disabled parents? (Is it being monitored independently? Are disabled parents involved in the monitoring process? (or parents generally)

Is the policy being monitored for its impact on specific groups of disabled parents (those with learning difficulties, sensory impairments, mental health problems, physical impairments)?

What evidence has been collected of its impact so far?

Is there any evidence of good practice in relation to disabled parents?

How do you record and disseminate good practice?

What, in your view, are the key factors that help promote good practice in relation to disabled parents' participation in their children's education?

Finally, can you give us any examples of good practice re. disabled parents' participation in their children's education?

*(If not, ask: What, in your view, would constitute an example of good practice?)*

How are you informed of policy developments and practice in other parts of the UK?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix B: Topic Guide for Parents

Perhaps you could begin by telling us a wee bit about yourself. *(It's useful (normal practice) for us to be able to give a broad picture of the parents who have participated in the study without identifying anyone individually.)*

- Do you live on your own or with a partner?
- Could I ask how old you are? (which age bracket are you in?)  
16-24 25-34 35-44 45-54 55-64 65+
- How many children do you have and what age are they?
- What kind of school do they go to? (primary/ secondary; local authority/ independent/ private; mainstream/ 'special'; residential?)

Could you tell me about some of the good experiences you have had around being involved in your children's education?

*Checklist prompts:*

- What happened?
- When was this?
- Who was helpful?
- Which services were involved?
- Any voluntary organisation/ advocacy involvement?

*IF there was a specific problem /issue:*

- How was it overcome? (practical/ policy/ attitudinal factors)
- What is different now that the issue is resolved? (for the child/ for parents/ for family as a whole?)
- Could anything have been done differently/ better?

*OR if the experience is one of good practice generally:*

- What have you found helpful? (e.g. staff attitudes/ practical support/ local policy)
- How do these good experiences affect child/ parents/ family as a whole?
- Could anything be done differently/ better?

Overall, have you had good experiences of being involved in your child's education?

*If not:*

- Roughly how much has been good and how much not so good?
- Could you **briefly** say what the more difficult issues have been?

Overall, how involved do you feel in your child's education?

How important is it to you to feel involved? Would you like to be more involved (or less involved)? (*If 'yes' to either, in what ways?*)

***Supplementary question to be asked only if not already covered***

Has your school asked you how you would like to be involved in your child's education and what help they can be in assisting with this?

Would you want them to do this?

And if so, do you have any suggestions on this?

*(check: does the school know that you are a disabled parent? If so, how do they know?)* Has your school invited you to discuss any disability issues that may affect your involvement in your child's education? Would you like this to be done? If

so, how? (*How approachable have you found school heads or teachers to be in relation to this? Have they been open to discussing any support that might help?*)

Have you experienced any changes in staff expectations about your child's performance once they have been made aware of your impairment?

What kind of changes would you like to see?

### ***Ask all parents***

(*Over the last two or three years*) have you noticed any differences in how your school involves parents generally?

*If the parent has given examples of things working on a strategic, training, procedural, policy or advocacy level:* With your agreement, we would like to speak to someone at the school or local authority about the policy issues that you have told us about, because we would like to collect good practice examples of policy. We would not talk about your individual experience with them, but we would need to say why we are contacting them, and would need to say that we are contacting them at your suggestion. If that's okay, could you suggest who would be helpful for us to speak to about the policies you have mentioned?

Finally, is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

Is it okay for us to phone/contact you if there is anything we need to clarify?



## Appendix C: Interview Guide for Professionals

### **Monitoring questions**

Type of school (primary/ secondary; local authority/ independent/ private; mainstream/ 'special'; residential?)

What is your job title and your role?

How long have you been in post?

How many pupils does the school have? (and approximately how many disabled pupils/young carers?)

### **Questions related to the experience of the parent we interviewed (will vary each time). Typical questions:**

(Parent) told us that they had good experiences of x policy/ practice/training/procedure/transport/attitude. Are you aware of the parent's experience? (*make sure school understand the experience as the parent described it to us*). Could you tell us any more about ... [*specify detail as required*]?

How much is the parent's experience likely to have been the result of a particular approach taken by, or the personal attitude of, an individual staff member? And how much might it have been influenced by school policies, school leadership, school ethos, staff training, or by a particular way that you do things here? Could you tell us more about this? (*break question down as appropriate*)

### **If formal policy/practice/training/procedure/transport/ attitude:**

How was this developed? How long has it been in place? Has the policy/approach changed over time?

How was it instigated? e.g. experience of another disabled parent, leadership of head teacher, response to local authority policy or influence of Disability Discrimination Act (*i.e. where*

*does the 'drive' come from – is it internal or external?)*

Are you measuring any outcomes from it – or are there anecdotal outcomes (other examples)? How are you planning to develop the policy in future? Are disabled parents involved with monitoring or influencing it? Does legislation from Government, guidance from other bodies, or funding policy at local authority level have an impact on this policy? *Could you name these policies, organisations or funding streams that have helped/hindered?*

***If not answered already, ask the following:***

Is the school aware of numbers of disabled parents?

If so – how is this information collected? What use do they make of it?

What steps if any do they take to ensure disabled parents are involved in their children's education in terms of support at home? (Same question re involvement within the school)

Does the school consult disabled parents when developing policies or procedures? Does it involve any other disability groups?

Do staff receive any training relating to disability?

Has the Disability Equality Duty made a difference to the school's approach to involving disabled parents?

What would help the school to further support disabled parents?

Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Thank you.





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