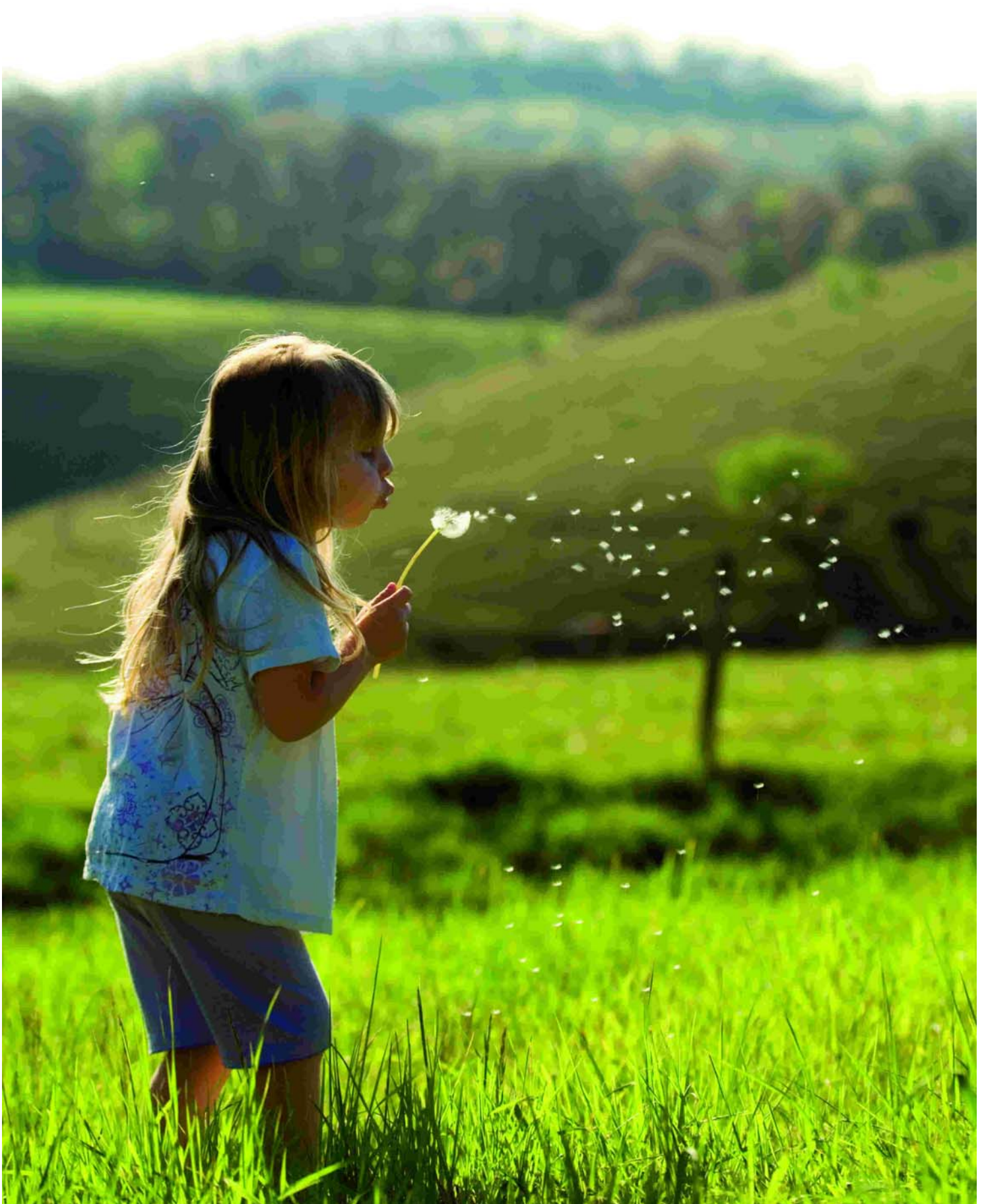




Families not areas suffer rural disadvantage

Support for Rural Families in Wales



Children in Wales is the national umbrella children's organisation in Wales. Children in Wales aims to promote the interests of and take action to identify and meet the needs of children, young people and their families in Wales. It's work is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children in Wales works on many levels to develop support for mothers, fathers and carers in Wales to implement the UNCRC. We work to improve the support and information available to them by giving parents information, by supporting professionals who work with families and by working with the Welsh Assembly Government and the National Assembly for Wales. We seek the views of parents, carers and children in Wales and work to ensure these views are communicated to policy makers and practitioners.

Children in Wales coordinates a range of Forums including two multi agency forums with a focus on parents: Fforwm Magu Plant (Parenting Forum) and Fatherhood Wales.

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Key Messages

The Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a basis for all its work with children. For a majority of children the family home is where they will realise many of the rights laid out in the UNCRC. The UNCRC itself recognises parents' key role - Article 18 enshrines the rights of parents to receive support in their role. Family environments characterised by warmth, responsiveness and stimulation and other factors associated with good parenting have shown to be a protective factor for children growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.ⁱ

Evidence presented in this report makes it clear that the presence of poverty and social exclusion in rural Wales cannot be denied. This small piece of research aims to explore the specific delivery methods and processes, which have proven to be especially effective in serving rural families. The study is in the form of a survey of key individuals and organisations that have a role in providing support for rural parents. It is intended to provide an insight into broadly what services are available and whether the needs of rural families are reflected in local authority planning.

Whilst agencies felt that families had a general satisfaction with rural living services to support families in their parenting role are patchy. Agencies highlighted a number of issues faced by families including problems accessing services, leisure opportunities and welfare advice. Many families' problems were exacerbated by the lack of affordable transport and struggling on a low-income. Families with a disabled child had particular problems accessing suitable services locally. A number of agencies highlighted the particular problems of adjusting and integrating into communities that were faced by families who had migrated to rural locations in Wales from urban areas in England. Services such as family centres were seen as key in helping these families adjust and integrate.

Agencies interviewed as part of the study showed that a range of initiatives have been developed to meet the needs of families in rural areas in Wales. Agencies often struggled however to justify the provision of services outside of Communities First/Flying Start areas and in some counties this had created a north/south divide.

Agency and local authority representatives highlighted areas that could improve the provision of services to families, particularly those of low-income. These were: increased levels and more flexible forms of funding which acknowledge the increased costs of providing services in rural areas; models of service provision that acknowledge rural conditions; partnership working on a local and cross-county level and improved transport services.

The report makes a number of recommendations in relation to rural policy and service provision.

Introduction

Children in Wales has for many years actively been promoting high quality services for children and their families, including those in rural areas. Through our various networks and forums, which bring professionals working with families together, we have been conscious of the difficulties faced by some families bringing up children in rural areas. The stereotype of rural life as being “idyllic” can be misleading as many families, particularly those on low income, find it very difficult to access services and support which would make it easier for them to raise their family. Service providers also face challenges in providing some of the services for families that are taken for granted in urban areas.

This small piece of research aims to explore the specific delivery methods and processes, which have proven to be especially effective in serving rural families. The study is in the form of a survey of key individuals and organisations that have a role in providing support for rural parents. The study is intended to provide an insight into broadly what services are available and whether the needs of rural families are reflected in local authority planning.

Some Welsh Local Authorities have developed innovative responses to their rural settings and this study aims to share that good practice. It also aims to make recommendations in relation to rural policy.

Definitions

- **Definition of parenting**

Parenting is an activity undertaken by those who bring up children. This includes mothers and fathers, foster carers and adoptive parents, step-parents, and grandparents. Local authorities also act as corporate parents for children and young people in their careⁱⁱ. The experiences and approaches of mothers and fathers are often different – the generic term ‘parent’ is used as shorthand as a consideration for space and linguistic flow.

- **Definition of Rurality**

It was decided to interview key individuals in the 9 predominantly rural unitary authorities as identified by the Wales Rural Observatory in their survey of Rural Services in Wales. These were Monmouthshire, Denbighshire, Ceredigion, Powys, Gwynedd, Carmarthenshire, Isle of Anglesey, Conwy and Pembrokeshire.

Objectives of the Project

There are four key aims to this piece of work:

- To review existing literature on family life and services in rural Wales
- To explore current agency activity on family/parenting support - what services are provided; what are the issues and concerns
- To highlight the main barriers to delivering services to families in rural areas
- To identify good practice examples of service delivery in rural areas

Methodology

- Relevant policies, research findings and literature were reviewed.
- 13 semi-structured interviews covering a range of issues (see Appendix 1) were conducted with key individuals (See Appendix 2) from each of the local authorities under investigation namely Monmouthshire, Denbighshire, Ceredigion, Powys, Gwynedd, Carmarthenshire, Isle of Anglesey, Conwy and Pembrokeshire. Questions focused on the individual's perceptions of their authority area; barriers to delivering services; good practice examples of delivering services in rural areas and recommendations for policy development. Most interviews took place over the telephone.
- One brief interview took place with West Wales Women's Aid. One interview also took place with ContinYou who lead on work around community focused schools.
- One visit took place to one of Plant Dewi's family centres including to an outreach parent's group.
- Evidence was also given electronically by professionals following a call for evidence.

Context

The Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a basis for all its work with children and has translated the Convention into seven core aims that provide the policy framework for its work with children in Wales. For a majority of children the family home is where they will realise many of the rights laid out in the UNCRC. Parents clearly have a pivotal role as guardians and advocates of children's rights with a responsibility on the state to act as final guarantor. The UNCRC itself recognises parents' key role - Article 18 enshrines the rights of parents to receive support and identifies them as the people with primary responsibility for decisions relating to their children. Parenting is an activity that needs support - parents need the resources and support to fulfil their obligations to enhance the quality of their children's lives.

Family environments characterised by warmth, responsiveness and stimulation and other factors associated with good parenting have shown to be a protective factor for children growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.ⁱⁱⁱ Sensitive, available and consistent childcare practices have been shown to promote adaptive coping in children living in poverty by establishing positive expectations about future relationships and a positive self-image.^{iv} Many parents need appropriate support services and parenting education to equip them to nurture, protect and support their children effectively, especially if they have had poor experiences of being parented themselves. Parenting today can be extremely challenging and even more so when parents are raising children in difficult circumstances. Children need their parents' affection and emotional security but the parents themselves may be struggling to deal with their own emotional and practical issues. Parenting support can provide parents with essential knowledge, skills and resources to help them manage their child's behaviour, improve their emotional well-being, develop emotional resilience and improve the parent-child relationship.

Rural policy in Wales tends to be associated with agriculture and resources and policy directed at the support of family and community in rural areas is limited^v. Support that applies to both rural and urban areas is available but not necessarily developed in a way that is specifically applicable to the rural context. The Welsh Assembly Government helps support services for parents through Cymorth^{vi} and support for parents is also provided through the Flying Start initiative, Communities First and through Integrated Children's Centres. This support is targeted to the most disadvantaged communities in tight geographical areas with high concentrations of disadvantage. Initiatives such as Integrated Children's Centres echo a trend in health care services of increasing centralisation. There are very good reasons for this centralisation. Centralised health and family centre units achieve economies of scale and make effective use of resources. It also means that teams of professionals can share expertise and information making partnership working more effective, which can be very positive for families and can help safeguard children. This increased centralisation however can have a negative impact on rural communities. There is some evidence in relation to health services that services are taken up less

often or later and that the impact is felt by those of low incomes, those with poor access to transport and the elderly and disabled.^{vii} A study in Norfolk found that the number of visits to inpatient clinics decreased with increasing distance from the patient's home to hospital. This effect is referred to as 'distance decay' and can lead to poorer health outcomes for remote patients.^{vii} Research is needed to see whether the same effect can be felt by parents who wish to access family support services located some distance from the home. There is certainly evidence that parents of disabled children in rural areas have particular difficulties accessing suitable services for their children particularly if they are of low incomes.^{xiii}

Literature Review

- **Transport**

With this increased centralisation and targeting of services to distinct geographical areas access to transport becomes increasingly important. A number of surveys of Wales have shown that low-income families often struggle with transport. A quarter of households in Wales do not have a car^{viii} which makes them reliant on public transport to access services. Households in social class DE are four times more likely to be without a car than in social class AB but public transport is often infrequent, unreliable and expensive or in many rural areas simply does not exist which makes it extremely difficult to access these services and maintain social networks which can be crucial in supporting families in raising their children. One in four people in Wales felt that the local hospital is one of the most difficult locations to access via local bus services.^{ix} Forty-nine percent of respondents to a Wales Rural Observatory survey said that there was someone in their household who has problems getting to key services. Only six percent of Town and Community Councils responding to a Wales Rural Observatory survey^x had no bus service at any time of the week but bus services that ran at peak hours were fairly limited in large parts of rural Wales with only 50% of communities with less than 1000 people having such a service. Even when there is public transport it is not always possible for parents to go to a service and return in time to collect children from school.^{xiii} Research shows that while those on low incomes in rural areas are more likely to have a car than those in urban areas they are likely to spend a larger proportion of their income on transport.^{xi}

"The shops are 10 miles either way. When the car is out with him at work, I just walk. The buses are not regular. It's too hard, you can get stranded for three hours, and most of them you can't get the pushchair on...." Parent living in rural Wales

- **Availability of services**

There is variability in the provision and availability of services between different rural areas but the general picture is of significantly less provision than in rural areas. Seventy-four percent of Town and Community Councils responding to a Wales Rural Observatory survey^x did not have a publicly run nursery and 78% were without a privately run nursery but only 5% did not have a playgroup. Welfare services for vulnerable groups were also absent from most rural communities. However the research did show a general satisfaction with living in rural areas and generally a strong sense of community inclusion. A Wales Rural Observatory survey on poverty

and social exclusion^{xii} found almost two thirds of respondents (66%) had spoken with neighbours 'several times a week'. Around half of all low-income respondents (54%) had a family member living within five miles of their home although for 23% of all respondents the nearest family member was at least 50 miles away. Respondents to this survey did not necessarily have children. There is no similar survey showing the availability of family support services in rural areas.

"There's nothing here. Nothing for the children, and not much for us either. They are just on the streets. We need more mother and toddler groups, really close to here, so I can go with my friends. Everything is so far away" Parent of young children

- **Rural Poverty**

Rural life is often associated with farming families with 4x4 cars, horse riding girls and idyllic lifestyles. For many families in rural Wales living on a low-income the reality is very different. An NCH/Barnardo's Cymru report^{xiii} found that low income, poor housing, inadequate services, and limited public transport characterise day to day life for many families living in rural Wales. A similar picture also emerged from Barnardo's Cymru research of fathers in Blaenau Ffestiniog.^{xiv}

The 2001 Census of Population indicates that in rural Wales 3% of households contained at least one person who was unemployed. The profile of unemployment in parts of Anglesey and Gwynedd shows similarities to rates in the valleys^{xii}. Wales Rural Observatory research^{xii} shows that the proportion of working households in rural Wales earning less than £10,000 in 2003 was identical to that in urban areas, at 20% and only slightly below the figure for the valleys (21%). This report indicates that eastern and western rural areas of Wales tend to have a pattern of household income similar to that reported in the valleys. Even in Monmouthshire the authority with the highest average income in Wales, 15% of households still live on low-income. This survey however included the whole population and the most numerically significant low-income group in rural Wales is older people. Benefit take-up rates or welfare benefits have also been shown to be lower in rural areas.^{xv}

"I live hand to mouth really. Rents are really high, and wages here are so bad you can't think about buying" Lone parent

- **Homelessness**

According to the Wales Rural Observatory^{xvi} the number of homeless households in rural areas has exceeded that for urban areas from 2000 onwards. The official homelessness total in rural areas in 2005 exceeded that in urban areas by 951 households and the Valleys total by 556 households. Although these are not necessarily households with children, rural Wales had the highest proportion of homeless acceptances with the priority need. This is the presence of dependent children, a vulnerable older person or a vulnerable person with a disability. There is also an acute lack of affordable housing and renting in the private sector is insecure as this quote shows:

"You swap from one to the other. They keep deciding to sell. I can't see our position changing, at least until the children have been through secondary school. The waiting list for council housing is huge. I just wish that no-one could move me out of my home..... I would only get allocated a house if we were

homeless. There's no housing here. Prices are rocketing" Parent in private rented accommodation who has had to move several times

- **Migrant workers**

According to research from the TUS more than 40% of workers from the 'new European Union' states have settled in rural counties of the UK. Between May 2004 and March 2006 39200 applications were made to the Worker Registration Scheme, which is obligatory for workers from Central and Eastern European accession countries that intend to work in the UK for at least a month. Of this group 9,230 registrations were for work in Wales.^{xvii} Ninety-seven percent had no dependents. However other surveys in the UK have found that many migrant workers do not register with the scheme, which suggests that up to 8092 workers from Central and Eastern European accession countries could be living in Wales.^{xvii} Guidance from the Citizens Advice Bureau suggests that increased numbers of migrant workers are seeking advice from the Citizens Advice service and that a general lack of understanding about basic services and facilities is a matter of concern for migrant workers.^{xviii} Families were not always aware, for example, that they needed to register their children at school.^{xvii} It is unclear how many migrant workers have their families with them but a report by the Wales Rural Observatory suggests the number of children accompanying parents has increased.^{xvii} This report also notes that obtaining information on the migrant workforce is complex and not always robust.

- **Vulnerable Families**

Research by Save the Children^{xix} found that the rural parts of England and Wales could exacerbate problems created by domestic violence and that the geographical isolation of rural life (particularly if a family has been moved from an urban into a rural environment) could be particularly disengaging. This, coupled with a lack of activities available for young people in rural areas can exacerbate their sense of social and emotional displacement. The report also concludes that there can be difficulties for families already living in rural areas and experiencing domestic abuse:

"Paradoxically, while both adults and children who have experienced domestic violence in rural areas are in many cases invisible to service providers and policy makers, they often fear being highly visible in their local community".

A woman living in a rural area may be reluctant to seek help at a family centre or Women's Aid Office if she is afraid that her visit may come to the attention of her abuser or she may be reluctant to move into a refuge if it means moving far away from people who might support her^{xv} or worried about leaving farm animals.^{xix}

- **Minority Ethnic Families in Rural areas**

Every rural county in Wales has some ethnic minorities within it. A study in rural Suffolk found that ethnic minorities were less likely to use child care services partly because they thought they were aimed at white clientele.^{xv} It may be wrongly assumed that minorities do not require services.^{xv}

Some groups may experience isolation because of negative views held about them. Gypsy Travellers are one such group where research has shown that they may be stigmatised by providers and the local community.^{xx}

- **Costs of Rural Service Provision**

There is clear evidence that there is a premium to providing services in rural areas^{xxi} of a similar standard to those in urban areas. This is due to the geography of rural areas, the smaller, dispersed populations and the increased costs of staff travelling time. One survey in rural Northumberland found that staff spent between 25 and 33 per cent of their time travelling compared to seven to ten per cent for urban staff.^{xv} Despite these higher costs of providing services resource allocation for public services disadvantage rural communities with their bias towards concentrations of population and centralisation of services.

Findings

The findings are presented below under the key themes relating to the questionnaire (see Appendix 1).

Issues faced by families

- *Transport*

Lack of public transport is a real issue in preventing parents from accessing services. A lot of places are inaccessible by public transport full stop. Public transport tends to be into the nearest town and out again but these are often only once or twice a day, which will not necessarily fit into the school day. Professionals said that families would scrimp on food to run a car as it is considered as necessary as the food bill. Surveys give the impression that car ownership is associated with not being deprived but actually this masks the fact that people will make major sacrifices in other areas of their lives to afford to run a car. Car ownership also does not necessarily translate to access to a car as the wage earner will often take the car which may leave the other parent at home with young children with no transport to access services. Petrol in rural areas is often a lot more expensive than it is in urban areas. Access to any service such as hospitals, welfare advice, leisure and supermarkets depends on access to a car. In Gwynedd the nearest hospital for some families is 40 miles away which takes hours on the bus and requires a number of changes. Powys has the same picture.

The following are quotes from families living in rural areas who had been invited to attend a 'Living with Teenagers' group to be held in Carmarthen town:

"We might only come every other week because of the fuel prices"
"I don't think the bus will get me there and back in time to pick up the younger ones"

Some disabled children need frequent visits and those on low income can claim expenses back from the NHS only for some kinds of appointments but not others. Obviously the time taken to get to appointments and the logistics of getting there causes stress both to the child, the parents and other siblings.

Families of offenders will often have a long difficult journey to visit a family member in prison as there are no womens' prisons in Wales and prisons for men are situated along the M4 corridor or in Liverpool. Nearly half of all prisoners lose contact with their families whilst in prison^{xxii} and presumably long protracted journeys are a contributing factor. Visits to family in prison also causes financial hardship to families who are already facing a reduction in household income as well as often an increase in outgoings due to the need to support the prisoner with phone cards, stamps, stationery etc.

- *Access to services*

In most counties services for families are provided in the main towns and in Communities First, Objective One and Flying Start areas based on areas with high

concentrations of disadvantage. In Pembrokeshire and Denbighshire there is a north/south divide with external funding for services in Pembrokeshire being concentrated in the south and in Denbighshire in the north of the county. Additional services beyond the basic provision available universally such as health visiting are very patchy.

- *Isolation*

Some families don't even live within a village setting. The nature of local communities has changed – young people have tended to migrate which has meant a fall in the school roll. It could be a fairly large village but not have sufficient young children to make a nursery viable. These demographics hit families with young children who don't have that peer support of other parents with young children and they can often feel isolated. Children are often bussed into school, which again means that parents miss contact with other parents in the schoolyard.

- *Lack of affordable housing*

There is no ready source of rented accommodation in most rural authorities and if the area is desirable it pushes house prices up. In some areas there is also a lot of holiday rentals, which reduces the available stock. This lack of affordable housing has a real impact on families with a disabled child. The restricted availability of affordable rented accommodation reduces mobility because it is extremely difficult for families to move to be nearer to services for a disabled child. Housing benefit does not cover all of a rent that is more expensive.

- *Lack of leisure opportunities*

Leisure centres are sparsely spread out and links with public transport are not always there. Young people rely on their parents to drive them to activities but it can be difficult for parents with younger children to collect again in the evening. Some young people get around the problem by staying the night with friends but this can cause anxiety for parents. The Welsh Assembly Government's free swimming initiative may be inaccessible to families living in rural areas who don't have access to a car or can't afford the petrol costs.

- *Welfare advice*

Advice provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau is available only in the main towns. Information can be accessed on line but this assumes that the family has access to a computer and the Internet. Rural areas do not always have access to broadband even assuming that families can afford to pay for such a service. Shelter is producing an advice pack, which will have advice on debt and housing. Volunteers will be distributing these across Carmarthenshire. They are taking a proactive stance to getting advice out to rural areas although individual and specific advice will still need to be sought in the advice centres in towns.

- *Childcare*

Childcare is a real issue in some counties. The nature of local communities has changed – young people have tended to migrate which has meant a fall in the school roll. It could be a fairly large village but not have sufficient young children to make a nursery viable. There are viability issues with after-school clubs and difficulties with infrastructure exacerbate this. The lack of suitable childcare is a particular problem for families with a disabled child.

- *Employment*

Employment tends to be seasonal based on tourism or in local authority service. Traditional employment is in farming but this has been affected by problems such as foot and mouth. There are pockets of unemployment. Many people commute long distances or work away during the week and only come home at weekends.

Issues experienced by particular groups

- *Families with a disabled child*

Families with a disabled child face particular difficulties and any of the issues highlighted above are magnified two-fold for these families. There is a lack of short breaks and special education is also an issue because specialist services tend to be located in larger towns or sometimes only at the other end of the county. It is difficult to provide services when the population is so spread out. There is a similar issue with services for young carers. There is very little support post 16.

- *Migrant workers*

Migrant workers are mostly situated in towns in rural counties but these will be quite often fairly isolated. Some Black and Minority Ethnic families have taken on shops in villages. Both these groups have often lost their usual support networks such as extended families. Language can also be an issue. The cost of using interpreters is not included in planning for costs of a service, is expensive and therefore really only used in high risk situations rather than in preventative work. Communicating with families through an interpreter can also be difficult. English courses are not readily available in rural areas. Some information is being translated into Polish in Carmarthenshire for migrant workers. There is often a lack of understanding of where to go for services so for example they have been turning up at Accident and Emergency instead of going to the local GP.

- *Inward Migration*

In some counties quite a lot of families have been re-housed from England. It is often very difficult for these families to adjust. They may have come from bigger English towns like Manchester to live in small rural towns or villages. Some families have been re-housed because they are fleeing domestic violence. They often find it extremely difficult to adjust to rural life and the Pembrokeshire Women's Aid have found that women who come to the refuge from towns and cities will often return back to the abusive situation they have fled from. Families who are re-housed from England are often not readily accepted especially in predominantly Welsh speaking communities. They often have no support network so feel very isolated. They may also have very high needs – for example they may be escaping domestic violence and be emotionally vulnerable. They are not accustomed to living in these sorts of areas. Family centres are very often a life-line to help these families integrate and re-build their lives. Refuges do not always have capacity to support families once they are re-housed in the community and have left the refuge.

- *Low-income groups*

Problems of isolation are exacerbated for low income groups because of the costs of shopping locally, lack of public transport, costs of car ownership and petrol and access to services, childcare and employment opportunities. These low-income

families are often living side-by-side with more affluent families and their situation can contrast quite sharply.

Positive aspects of parenting in rural areas

The feeling of space and the opportunities for children to play in the open air independently of adults was one of the main positives of bringing up children in rural areas. A lot of families have a strong feeling of identity with the area.

There was also a view that other people in the community will often look out for children in the area and there were strong informal support networks.

In some areas there are still small schools, which can support community cohesion and act as a hub. In many areas there are relatively low levels of crime although conversely this pushes house prices up.

There are a lot of rural social activities focused around young farmers, sports clubs and around Welsh language cultural activities. Obviously these are not necessarily accessible to everyone in the community or the leisure activities all families would want involvement in.

Parenting strategy

Professionals were asked whether their authority had a parenting strategy and whether this took account, or would take account of rural issues.

- *Monmouthshire*

There is no parenting strategy yet but there is a parenting sub-group of the Children and Young people's Partnership, which has met a few times. This consists of voluntary and statutory representation with the involvement of families. The group is currently exploring how to produce a strategy. The parenting strategy will sit under the single plan. Rural issues will be taken into account.

- *Powys*

The parenting strategy is in development. The needs of rural families are always considered.

- *Ceredigion*

The strategy does not necessarily say the word 'rural' in it but it does reflect the rural nature of the county.

- *Isle of Anglesey*

There is no parenting strategy. Parenting as a need is discussed in Partnership meetings. There is an intention to improve the co-ordination of parenting initiatives though not necessarily through a strategy.

- *Carmarthen*

The parenting strategy guides the parenting team and there is also a dedicated rural worker who provides parenting education through the medium of Welsh. She makes home visits and runs groups. She proactively seeks people to attend courses through health visitors, GPs and advertisements in shops promoting services.

- *Gwynedd*

There is no strategy yet but the authority is in the first stage of mapping parenting services locally. A strategy will be developed from that. Support is coming from Incredible Years in Bangor.

- *Conwy*

A draft strategy has been produced and will be presented to the Framework.

- *Denbighshire*

There is no strategy yet but the authority is in the process of developing one and it will take account of rural issues/needs.

- *Pembrokeshire*

There is no strategy yet but the authority is in the process of developing one. There is an active parenting forum which will assist in the development of the strategy

How the needs of families are identified in rural areas

Professionals were clear that health visitors were at the heart of identifying the needs of families. In the Isle of Anglesey Health Visitors work in partnership with the Rural Family Service to identify families in need and new parents in the Llangefni area are given written information from Health Visitors about services. In this area there has been a pilot looking at protocols for sharing information between the project and health visitors to ensure that parents get services they need.

The Children's Information Service and Home Start were also identified as key services in identifying needs.

In some authorities information has been collected about need for the childcare sufficiency reviews through surveys, focus groups and events with parents. In Conwy the Parenting Coordinator took a bus around the county to a wide variety of venues, including rural areas, with a semi-structured questionnaire

Needs have also been identified by looking at indicators of need such as health indicators, educational performance at Key Stage 1 and cases that come into Social Services assessment teams.

Services to support families in rural areas

There is a range of services available but some of these are exclusively in more urban areas of the county or in geographical areas of high deprivation. There are Cylch Ti a Fi, Cylchoedd Meithrin and parent and toddler groups run by Mudiad Ysgol Meithrin and Wales Pre-school Play Group Association but sustainability is an issue because of the low numbers of parents using the groups. It is becoming more difficult to set up these groups because of the requirements that need to be met and difficulties of infrastructure. Support is also given to families from a network of Home Start volunteers.

In some counties there are mobile services such as toy libraries, traditional libraries and play services delivered on specially adapted buses. Communities are made aware that the bus is coming to their area.

In Conwy a bilingual telephone support line is provided for parents of children aged 2+ with a planned programme of support. The aim of this is to address service access difficulties for parents who experience a range of problems with their children. It is a model of service very appropriate to rural areas because it can overcome some practical and financial difficulties for users. Parents can talk at a time that suits them and there is no need to travel anywhere or make childcare arrangements^{xxiii}. See spotlight on Conwy.

In some areas parenting classes are provided through referrals coming through comprehensive schools. Parenting education is also provided through Youth Offending Teams including one-to-one work.

In Denbighshire there are a lot of services concentrated in the north of the county because this area has received a concentration of funding from Objective 1, Communities First, Flying Start etc whereas the south of the county which is more rural has very few services. Support in the south is mainly one-to-one because there isn't enough population to have groups set up on a regular basis. The picture is very similar in Pembrokeshire with the south getting a lot of services and the north not.

In Pembrokeshire there are Dad's Groups running in the south and a Dad's Group is going to be developed shortly in the more rural north.

Some authorities have specialist rural workers or rural projects providing services or acting as a base for outreach work with families.

There are family centres but in most counties these are usually concentrated in urban areas of high deprivation. Schools are often a major resource in rural areas and can be a focus for the community. Some primary schools in rural areas have developed community focused school clusters to share resources.

Spotlight Carmarthenshire - network of Family Centres

In conjunction with Plant Dewi and local groups, a network of 12 Family Centres have been developed across the County that offer support and advice to families. The family centres are in local authority owned housing so they are placed exactly where the families are living including in more rural areas. They are also small which is more practical when the population is small and also reduces fuel bills etc. A range of activities and courses are provided for the children to help them develop socially, emotionally and academically. Support, advice and courses are also provided for their parents. There are also regular outreach groups for parents and their children, which are held in schools and community centres in the vicinity of the family centre.

“The centre has given my children the opportunity to experience various play experiences and the ability to socialise thereby preparing them for school” Parent at Garnant Family Centre, Ammanford

Spotlight Conwy – planned bilingual telephone support line^{xxiii}

A bilingual telephone support line is provided for parents of children aged two plus with a planned programme of support. The aim of the service is to address service access difficulties for parents who experience a range of problems with their children. It is a model of service very appropriate to rural areas because it can overcome some practical and financial difficulties for users. Parents can talk at a time that suits them and there is no need to travel anywhere or make childcare arrangements. It can also be suited to parents who have found traditional forms of support or group work unsatisfactory. This is a tier 2 service which gives planned advice to parents who have been referred and service users are drawn primarily from low-income and rurally isolated areas. Three NCH social care practitioners deliver it. After an initial assessment an action plan is drawn up and hourly weekly calls are made for around 12 weeks. After each call the service provider draws up an action plan and a copy of the plan is sent to the client. The following two quotes show how much parents value the service:

"The telephone service goes on and I like that. That's what keeps me going as well. I can load off with what's happened and I can get advice of what to do or how to sort the problem out. Talk about a problem and get advice."^{xxiii}

"As well as telephone support, things would arrive by post, like star charts, stickers, smiley stickers, she went to a lot of trouble. Little added extras, also an evaluation of the call work was sent out. Also if you asked a question and (the service operator) didn't know, she would find out."^{xxiii}

Spotlight Anglesey - Rural Family Service

The Ynys Môn Rural Family Service targets services to very small populations who may not show up in deprivation profiles and in small rural communities. The Family Service brings together a multi-disciplinary team, working through a range of different approaches. Health visitors also work in partnership with the Rural Family Service. New parents in the Llangefni area are given written information about services.

Barriers to service provision

A number of barriers to service provision were highlighted:

- *Infrastructure*

In some authorities infrastructure was highlighted as a major barrier as some facilities such as village halls were often not of a high enough standard to run a crèche.

- *Sustainability*

Sustainability was another issue highlighted due to the small numbers attending groups and the high costs therein. Families often have diverse needs, widely scattered. It takes longer to establish a project in rural areas so there is limited value to short term funding. Resources are targeting families in Flying Start areas not families in rural areas. Huge rural communities do not receive any services. Counties like Pembrokeshire and Monmouthshire are not perceived to be counties with high levels of need but this leaves large geographical areas cut off with little services. The majority of funding is concentrated in small geographical areas and those experiencing need are not always recognised.

- *Transport*

Transport was highlighted as a major barrier as services are not always on the bus route. Frequency of buses is also an issue. Some areas will not take buses because the lanes are too narrow. Transport creates additional costs for provision in the amount of time it will take for a professional to get to the family they want to work with and the additional costs of travel.

- *Staffing issues*

Health professionals, such as health visitors often have the same number of clients but have to travel much further from the main base to contact the families. Travel costs can be very high – in one project three times as much was spent on travel as actual activity. Lines of communication can be longer making information sharing more difficult. The physical distance can make it difficult to recruit volunteers because of the distances they need to travel. Volunteers in rural authorities may need to be asked to make a bigger commitment. Home Start volunteers are asked to give a commitment to families of 2 hours a week but they may need to travel 45 minutes to get to that family. This obviously also has implications for running costs.

How parents are made aware of services

- Word of mouth – considered very powerful
- Through community newsletter, posters in schools, libraries, local shops and town hall and fliers
- Referrals
- Home Start have an active role in signposting families to services available in their area
- Children's Information Service
- Professionals such as health visitors, education staff, school nursing team and youth service
- Association of Voluntary Organisations

- Internet

Assistance with transport

Some assistance with transport is offered to families to get to services but this is not consistently given. Transport is usually offered when families are referred by social services and some initiatives such as Home Start, Genesis and Sure Start offer limited help with transport to access services. Travel can be expensive and this is not always costed into a service. Obviously it is not sustainable to offer transport as a matter of course. Carmarthenshire did explore the use of community transport but this was not viable. Sometimes transport is offered for one-off events such as the family day organised in Carmarthen for Parents Week which put on 10 coaches to get families to the event.

Spotlight Monmouthshire

The 'Grass Routes' Community Bus is a demand responsive service, which is fully accessible to pushchairs and passengers in wheelchairs. It is a membership scheme, which anyone can join. To book a journey on the bus, members of the scheme call a free phone number. There are structured routes that visit isolated villages of Monmouth and surrounding areas. This is a very effective service, which is low cost and run by volunteers, but sustainability could be an issue if grants are not given to support its continuation.

Is a different model of service delivery being used in the more rural areas of the county than in the more urban areas?

- *Anglesey*

The Rural Family Service is an outreach rather than mainly centre based service. Sure Start is based on a rural outreach model. Flying Start in Anglesey also has an outreach element that takes account of the rural nature of communities. The ICC is based in Llangefni. Guidance from the Assembly gives an emphasis on bricks and mortar but an element of outreach will run from it.

- *Carmarthenshire*

A network of family centres has been developed in rural areas and a mobile service is provided by a specially adapted mobile bus which stops for a period of time in different areas, including rural locations. The ICC does not hit rural areas at all and any service provided outside Communities First areas has to be justified. One of the catchment areas for Flying Start is in a rural area but this had to be justified strongly and other indicators of poverty were looked at not just those that show up on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. With Flying Start childcare is fairly straight forward although the infrastructure for childcare is not always there. Providing the parenting strand is more of a challenge in rural areas because the communities are often close knit and families may therefore be reluctant to come forward and do a parenting course because of fear of stigma.

There is also a dedicated rural worker who provides parenting education through the medium of Welsh. She makes home visits and runs groups. She proactively seeks people to attend courses through health visitors, GPs and advertisements in shops promoting services. A mentoring service also operates which provides one-to-one behaviour management support and advice to parents of children aged 4 to 10 years through a team of health visitors, support workers and trained volunteers.

- *Gwynedd*

The ICC is set up in Blaenau Ffestiniog a provincial town with a population of 5000. Flying Start has been set up in deprived catchments in Blaenau Ffestiniog, Caernarfon and Bangor. Those delivering services will be on the road a lot. There have been problems with recruiting staff because of the distances health-visiting staff in particular will need to travel and the need to have bilingual staff.

- *Monmouthshire*

Limited services are provided to families in rural areas - services are provided to specific areas, as there are very small groups of parents in rural areas. The authority has to be realistic about what can be provided. Services are taken part way to families but families also have to go out to services. Flying Start is only in towns.

- *Conwy*

There is a bilingual telephone helpline (see spotlight), which is a different model of service more appropriate to rural areas. This is a tier two service which gives planned advice. There is also a play bus which gives out information to young people.

- *Denbighshire*

Funding for services in the more rural south is much less than in the more urban north. Getting to know communities and developing trust can take time in rural areas. Community networks may be less evident in rural areas than in urban areas so there tends to be a lot of dependency on individual workers' contacts and personal networks. If this worker moves on the threads can be lost. It can take a new worker a long time to make those contacts and build trust if they are new to the area. In rural areas those community networks and local knowledge are essential and losing an individual community based worker can have a greater impact than in a more urban environment. There is no Flying Start in the rural south.

- *Powys*

The ICC is in town but outreach work is being done. An agreement was made with the Welsh Assembly to have the ICC in 3 areas. One Sure Start project is rural and Radnorshire has an outreach service. There is no Flying Start in rural areas because those catchment areas do not hit deprivation figures. These areas just do not have the numbers of people to hit the levels expected to get funding. Pockets of deprivation are often hidden in more affluent areas. As many families as possible are reached in rural areas but this means spreading the service provision thin.

- *Ceredigion*

The ICC is in the south of the county so this is not necessarily accessible for everyone in the county. The family centre is used as a base for providing parenting classes but provision of these is also rotated around the county.

- *Pembrokeshire*

The model of service delivery being used in the more rural areas of the county than in the more urban areas is dependent on funding. Services are paid for by Cymorth or through Flying Start and funding is target driven to areas of concentrated deprivation mostly in the more urban south. The emphasis in the north is on mobile provision. There are Dad's Groups running in the south and a Dad's Group is going to be developed shortly in the more rural north

Ideas for what could be put in place in terms of policy, practice and funding that would make it easier to provide services for families in rural areas

- *Funding*

Funding from the Welsh Assembly Government is targeted and numbers driven but in practice this does not work in rural areas. There are pockets of deprivation in rural areas and these families have very little services and transport issues exacerbate this. Providing services outside Communities First areas has to be strongly justified and there is no acknowledgement of rural deprivation because of the concentration of numbers and how many people come through the service. This model does not fit the rural poverty picture. There are other indicators of relative poverty, which may be more sensitive to rural poverty.

Welsh Assembly Government grants should be longer term. It is very difficult to secure funding which is often short-term and has an expectation of innovative practice, which puts pressure on staff. It can take longer to set up a project in rural areas. Sufficient lead in time is needed to allow for planning and engaging with potential users of the service and other stakeholders. Grants should be for at least 3 years otherwise it is not long enough to deliver a quality piece of work. More and more is expected of Frameworks with changes in policy. Not enough time is given to make things work and sufficient time is not given to evidence success.

- *Costs of service provision in rural areas*

There needs to be an acknowledgment that there are additional costs to delivering services in rural areas both in terms of transport costs and additional staff work time spent on the road. Transport is a real issue for rural families, which is not accounted for in set up costs for services. Mobile services are the ideal but it is expensive to buy buses and maintain them. More support should be available for involving families in consultation. Financial support is not always available for this. It is much more difficult to do this in rural areas. Smaller urban authorities are given much more resources than larger counties like Powys. Although these very rural counties have a smaller population the costs of serving people across such a large area are high.

- *Flexibility in policy*

There should be a greater degree of flexibility in policy on a national level to be more responsive to rural areas. Having an ICC building in a specific area is not appropriate for more rural counties. National policies are geared to urban areas and particularly a model that suits the M4 corridor but that is a real problem in rural areas in terms of infrastructure etc. There is an assumption that one size fits all and not enough flexibility to reflect on local need or sufficient sensitivity on whether there is evidence of need to fit the model dictated from the centre. There is often not enough time to implement initiatives especially in more rural areas where the infrastructure may be less well established.

- *All-Wales telephone helpline*

It would be good to see the all-Wales telephone helpline developed. Also it would be good to see the planned telephone helpline in Conwy (see spotlight) developed to meet the needs of those that are referred but there is no capacity to support.

- *Partnership working*

Partnership working is the key to success in rural areas with the sharing of management, set up costs, training etc between several organisations. Community schools initiative can be very powerful as it enables schools to be used for different services.

Cross-county cooperation is also important. Many rural communities are next door to each other but happen to be in different counties. Counties along the M4 corridor are in receipt of more funding and could share resources/services with communities in neighbouring counties.

- *Highways budget*

The Highways budget needs to be looked at as the costs of up keep of the network of lanes and smaller roads is high. These connected budgets have an impact on services. Also innovative solutions in providing public transport need to be explored.

Recommendations

- As recommended in the Bevan Foundation report on public transport^{viii} alternative forms of public transport that are flexible enough to cope with low demand need to be developed further. The report also recommended that planning policy should ensure that good public transport provision is 'designed in' to developments and that this is given consideration when the location of services is considered.
- Ensure that mainstream policies and programmes take account of the rural dimension. It should be recognised in the roll out of All-Wales initiatives that additional resources are needed to reach vulnerable and disadvantaged families when they are spread over a wide geographical area. There should be equitable funding to meet these additional costs.
- Due to limited funds refuges are not always able to support families once they leave the refuge. Increased funding would allow them to do more outreach work with such families.
- Collect and disseminate additional data on migrant workers throughout Wales, for rural Wales and at a local level. This should include both statistical information and examples of good practice in meeting the needs of migrant workers with families working in rural areas.^{xvii} Similarly the particular needs and issues of vulnerable English incomers re-housed in rural Wales should also be examined.
- Some rural Citizens Advice Bureaux have produced booklets containing key information on key themes of employment and benefits, housing, health, education and community services as well as basic information on the rules and procedures relating to vehicle ownership and use.^{xviii} Such a model could be used across Wales to increase migrant workers' awareness of their rights and responsibilities both for themselves and their children.
- WAG and other funding bodies need to look beyond numbers and include qualitative evaluation when considering the impact of a project.
- Perceptions of rural affluence need to be challenged. The needs of rural areas and the cost of meeting them are often compared with the needs and costs in urban areas. The Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities and health authorities have to accept that the unit cost of providing services in rural areas will be higher than in urban areas. The rural element of the Revenue Support Grant should be increased to reflect this.
- Government initiatives should take account of the needs of families living in rural areas and establish criteria that reflect the complexity of rural location, social disadvantage and relative need.
- Time management should be included in funding when working across a wide geographical area, which is very often the case with rural counties in Wales.
- Ways of measuring need in rural areas should be explored which take account of the pockets of deprivation within more affluent neighbourhoods. Indicators which are appropriate in urban areas may not be so in rural areas. For example families may run a car in rural areas but make significant sacrifices with other household items because it is so essential in terms of accessing services and employment.

- Getting to know communities and developing trust can take time in rural areas. Community networks may be less evident in rural areas than in urban areas. This perception is backed up by research, which shows that formal relationships in rural areas tend to be more personalised and that it may take longer to build up trust in these communities.^{xxiv} This highlights the importance of giving longer term funding so that staff have a chance to develop services effectively.
- IT has an important role to play in service provision in rural areas both in terms of helping share information between practitioners working remotely from each other but also in maintaining continued professional development. It may also be another area that could be developed for parenting support and education although consideration will need to be given to whether parents have access to a computer and the internet if this is going to be used. Similarly the evaluated success of the telephone service offered in Conwy should be explored as an additional model of service delivery for parents in rural areas. While not all families have access to a computer 95% of households in the UK own a landline telephone.^{xxiii}
- To build on this small piece of work a more in depth analysis of problems and solutions to providing social and health care in rural communities should be undertaken. This should include a systematic and extensive survey to collect examples of good practice and innovation in social care and parenting support in rural areas to establish what works and why. Connected to this there should be some work looking at training in this area to establish what training and development models (if any) are used among practitioners or volunteers working in rural areas and whether these should be extended.

Conclusion

The Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the UNCRC as a basis for its work with children and families and Article 18 enshrines the rights of parents to receive support in their role. For some low-income parents in need in more rural areas services are simply not available because the parents are not living in the right area earmarked for financial support and are unable to travel to use those services. In some authorities this has created a north/south divide. Service providers in rural areas face specific challenges to ensure they can provide a service to families in rural areas but many examples of good practice were picked up by this small piece of research. It is clear that services cost more to provide in rural areas but that this is not fully reflected in the funding allocation that local authorities receive. All-Wales policy models such as Integrated Children's Centres and Flying Start are clearly developed from an urban model and disadvantage families in need in less populated areas. Vulnerable families like those who have been re-housed due to domestic violence or other complex issues in particular need support services to help them integrate in the community.

The Wales Rural Observatory has produced some excellent surveys of rural Wales looking at homelessness,^{xvi} services^x and poverty.^{xii} It would be extremely useful to see the same type of survey being done to investigate the levels of support given to parents in rural Wales and identify gaps in service.

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