PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT WITH FAMILY HUBS:
SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

CSJ — The Centre for Social Justice

February 2025

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About the CSJ

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report Breakthrough Britain. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report It Happens Here shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2025 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Acknowledgements

Summary

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) convened this roundtable immediately after a key-note speech by the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson. The conversation brought together a range of stakeholders, including representatives from think tanks, charities and community organisations.

The purpose of this roundtable was to reflect on early years and parental engagement, to share insights. identify key priorities and to consider the role of Family Hubs. Participants also discussed best practice and potential future policy changes.

Key potential areas for policy change discussed included:

1. The continuation of Family Hubs

2. A single agreed definition of "school ready"

3. Clear, delineated, and explicit responsibilities between schools and parents

4. Upskilling of people working in early years and schools on how best to engage with parents

5. Utilising contact moments with new parents to offer more support and information (for example 20-week scan, birth registration, prenatal care/classes)

6. Teaching early years human development in the curriculum

7. Creating more opportunities to engage with parents and offer support and guidance (e.g. parent-toddler groups)

8. Better utilising existing community assets, such as churches and school buildings, to offer such opportunities.

Challenges in effective parental engagement

The roundtable started by discussing existing challenges that can act as barriers to effective parental engagement.

There was a recognition that there is a hesitation to talk about parenting, across government and beyond, which can then hinder helpful conversations about what more can be done to support and educate parents.

> *"And I think we all just need to…come out and say: of course it's tough if you're poor, of course it's tough if you've got SEN that isn't being supported properly, of course it's tough being a new parent, if you're working two jobs. All of those things are true, and also, as a parent, you need to be taking responsibility, and part of that definitely is about putting pressure on the government to give better, earlier, clearer advice, and to get over their squeamishness about being seen, to be willing to do that."*

Participants called for clearer terminology and communication around early years and parental engagement, with different terms often used synonymously which can cause confusion. One participant even questioned if the term 'parental engagement' was correct, noting:

> *"I see it as cogs and cogs engage. But which cogs are you talking about? Is it the parent and the setting or the school? And that's often talked about in terms of parent engagement, we tend to use it in parent involvement, or is it the parent and the child? And I think it's really important that at least we can get really clear about…when we're talking about parent-child interaction, and when we're talking about parent and other surrounding support [interaction]."*

On reaching and supporting parents with consistent, accurate and useful resources, one participant summarised the landscape as *"invariably too complex, too confusing"*. Epitomising this huge issue, another participant revealed that they had googled 'school readiness – what should be child be able to do?' with it producing a staggering 150 different answers, even finding three different definitions from Public Health England.

> *"If we have a single set of information sources that are based on …it's about having the consistency and the quality in the care, in terms of the rigour of how we get it out."*

> *"We know that all parents try their hardest and we just need to give them more advice and information."*

Social media, including TikTok, was identified by one participant as replacing the space that government and professionals should be inhabiting in helping guidance to parents. However, it was noted that the online sphere does not produce any clarity but instead causes further muddying of the waters and many parents, rightfully, do not trust the information they receive though social media.

> *"This whole point about the role of health visitors and…midwives…needs to be really thoughtfully brought into the mix. It's who are the trusted people to convey the right dosage of the right information at the right time."*

However, the agencies which should be responsible for accurate information and resources for parental engagement were themselves perceived to be fragmented and siloed by participants, leading to poor communication and outcomes. One participant identified the Department for Education as one such agency, commenting:

> *"…the problem that's still in the Department for Education, you have the schools division, you have the Early Years division, you have FE divisions…no one's go that overarching narrative…there isn't a parenting team. There isn't the group that talk about parenting…that's not the way it's structured."*

Strategies in effective parental engagement

The roundtable moved on to discussing effective strategies for parental engagement. There were a range of strategies raised by participants.

As part of this, participants highlighted the importance of Family Hubs and the key role they play as a community hub, offering parents support and guidance throughout a child's life.

> *"Family hubs [engage] with parents in a welcoming, friendly, trusted way, where you gently nudge and go 'have you thought about this at home and have you thought about doing that'."*

Participants called for parent champions, who are embedded in the community and trusted by the parents. One participant shared that some local areas are already using parent champions and experiencing real success.

Practically, the importance of leveraging community spaces was highlighted. The school hall and the church hall were given as examples of spaces that should be used for parent groups and family hubs. Piloting health visitor-led parental support groups could be incorporated into this too, something identified as already having been done successfully in Denmark.

> *"Parents being able to leave home. It's helping with their social isolation. It's helping with their wellbeing. They're then able to have better relationships with their kids. They're having it modeled in places and spaces and meeting friends and meeting peers and meeting parent champions."*
>
> *"For example, churches who are delivering, stay and play…[and] the gather movement has equipped…there's a school readiness guide for those people running stay and play groups. If you can just upskill the people to be able to have those engaged conversations with parents. That's a huge network of volunteers, completely free you can equip to pursue this goal and actually make a difference."*

Participants felt strongly about the need to equip and empower schools to engage with parents. In particular, schools in a good place to offer guidance to parents on how to support their child at every age, as their child grows.

> *"Parental engagement doesn't stop as your child reaches school, it continues on."*

> *"There's real work that could be done in teacher training, initial teacher training, ongoing teacher training etc...on the role of parents...around parent-child interactions at home and then also ongoing as they as they get older.!*

However, it was emphasised that the focus and support needs to start long before a child starts school. The first two years are so critical to the child's future development and education, therefore parents need to be reached earlier and given guidance and support on those important early years.

> *"...the single most critical factor in a child being [school] ready at five, you know, having been hitting its milestone, being developmentally ready to be able to access the curriculum, is where they're at at two..."*

There was dismay expressed at the current mentality of Key Stage 1 being commonly used as a signal for the beginning of early years engagement. There was frustration at the sense of rigidity and delay this conferred on the early years process, giving the impression it only began at this point rather than birth. One participant even said schools should not be viewed through the lens of early years development at all, although others disagreed. Ultimately, learning from birth was seen as fundamental in the reframing of early years development:

> *"I would say the number one thing they could do practically, is to start talking about learners from birth...or even pregnancy...if they just change the way they talk about the early years, such that education is consistent, a single thing that happens from birth through 18, instead of from five to 18. I think that would cost them nothing, but would change the conversation, the framing of the conversation, in a way that would then allow all these other things that people are doing to just come into focus, in a way that would be, I think, more impactful."*

Participants discussed how key early contact points with parents are currently not being utilised, for example the 20-week scan and the registration of birth. These are moments where parents can be given important information and have conversations with professionals.

> *"20 weeks, when you register the birth, every time you need a health visitor, every time you have a maternity nurse, when you give birth..."*

It was also suggested that, throughout school, children should learn about early neurodevelopment, how babies grow and develop and the role of the caregiver. Then, when the children are grown and starting their own families, they will have a basic understanding of how to support a baby's development.

> "In education they learn about three different types of sedimentary rock and how to, how to digest, how to dissect a frog, but they don't know anything about their own human development. Is it any wonder that when they leave and they go and they have a child, a proportion of them will have an infant and genuinely not realise that talking to them from the second they're born and reading to them and all of that is critical."

A collaborative, child-centric approach

The roundtable called for a greater emphasis on the needs and development of the child as the central focus above everything. More collaboration is needed with multiple stakeholders – including parents, schools, health services and community organisations – in a way that is both coordinated and holistic. One participant framed the child-centric approach using an analogy scrutinising the growth and development of a child:

> *"...the idea that you start with this child, as you say, a newborn baby, and you just look at everything that's happening around that child and you just relentless say 'who are they spending their time with? What is their sort of 'soup' that they're growing in?' That seems like the only way out of the conflict of is it schools or is it parents? Like, it's obviously both, because they're spending so long in both, and they're so influenced by both...you just need that laser focus on the child..."*

Participants observed that the relationship between teachers and parents often made this central focus difficult. By tackling this and the wider disconnect between relevant stakeholders, a sense of "collective responsibility" could be fostered, as one participant observed.

> *"There's something about the parental relationship with school. Of them saying adult to adult, just reminding you that that is your role, and this is our role."*
>
> *...There's this point about who is responsible for parents, and that's, that's sort of where it is that collective responsibility. It is social health."*

Participants again re-emphasised the role Family Hubs has to play.

> *"...but I go back to family hubs. I really, really hope we can encourage this government to go look [at it]. £300 million was invested. Let's not just throw all away because of political [reasons] and let's embed and really understand what works and really pursue best practices."*

What next?

The roundtable discussion prompted a number of policy ideas that should be explored going forward.

1. The continuation of Family Hubs

2. A single agreed definition of "school ready"

3. Clear, delineated, and explicit responsibilities between schools and parents

4. Upskilling of people working in early years and schools on how best to engage with parents

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