

Professional Briefing: The 'Birth to Five' Book

Background

Earlier this year, our members in England started to raise concerns regarding the availability of the Department of Health resource 'Birth to Five'. These concerns were raised at the Unite/CPHVA Health Visitor Forum and we contacted the Department of Health to find out whether the book was being discontinued.

Birth to Five is regarded highly by parents and professionals alike, and the Department of Health itself states¹;

"A key Department of Health publication, Birth to Five has been revised and will be given free to all parents in England. The book is extremely popular and a trusted authority on all aspects of early years. By providing in-depth support, useful contact information and advice on rights and benefits, the book is an excellent addition to the support provided by the health visiting team. The book's content has been updated to reflect new policies, changing social trends and advice and guidance."

In communication with the Department it became apparent that both 'The Pregnancy Book' and 'Birth to Five' were being considered as part of the Departments review of existing arrangements for producing printed and digital media. On behalf of our members we then asked for supplementary information about whether the book is continuing to be offered and provided in hard copy at this time and whether it would continue to be offered until the review had been completed. We also asked for clarity on the review process as well, with the following questions:

- what form the review is taking;
- how families and agencies are being consulted;
- the timescales for the review;
- and [asking them to] identify the person who is leading the review and will ultimately take the decision on the books (hard copy) future?

None of these questions were answered in subsequent communication.

¹ DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (2009) Birth to Five (2009 edition)

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_107303
accessed 06/10/2011



The current situation – our membership survey

We wanted to know what the current situation was locally for our members and their families. Therefore we requested that our members in England complete an online survey. During the two weeks that the survey was available we received 976 responses.

The headline results were that **84%** of members reported that their organisation currently gives out physical copies of the book.

We then asked members “if your organisation is currently giving out books, are you aware that stocks locally are running out?” **71%** of members reported that **Yes**, they were aware stocks locally were running out.

As the Department have pointed out in their replies to our letters that the book can be downloaded we also asked members whether they were aware that the book was available online. **62%** were aware and **37%** were not.

We then asked if members were aware it could be downloaded how many had either downloaded the book (or separate chapters). **19%** had downloaded some or the entire book and **81%** hadn't.

What our members think about the availability of the book

As the Department are reviewing the book we asked members if the Department was interested in their views, what would they tell them? Unsurprisingly, the majority of members who responded to the survey had an opinion. Some of these included;

...disadvantaged groups that health visitors are targeting will be further disadvantaged if there is reduced access to this publication... (84)

...not all families have access to the internet and others find it easier to dip into a book rather than go online... (105)

...this book is extremely useful in physical form...used all the time by professionals to look up/refer to when showing parents information. Not everyone has the internet... (142)

...we are here to reduce health inequalities, lets not disadvantage those most in need by withdrawing this excellent resource... (285)

...the book is a fantastic resource for parents and should not be available only to people with access to the internet and printers... (321)

...health visiting has been severely eroded, our staff complement is half what it was, therefore we depend heavily on parents finding answers and support from the book... (373)

...please keep it, health visiting resources are embarrassingly low... (604)

...BRING BACK THE BOOK... (780)

A change in direction?

Following Unite/CPHVA raising this issue, it was featured on the front page of The Guardian as part of their story '*Revealed: how NHS cuts are really affecting the young, old and infirm*'² and also on page 4 '*£20bn NHS cuts are hitting patients, Guardian investigation reveals*'³. In The Guardian article, Dr David Elliman, from The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, appeared to agree with many of our members feedback in saying "*If Birth to Five is no longer to be available to mothers in print, this is bad news. I am particularly concerned that those who profit from it most will be least likely to use it. This is a false economy.*"

We now understand that the Department are printing new copies to be distributed whilst the review is concluded (so a change from the previous position of not printing the book whilst the review was ongoing). However there is still no clarity on the review process itself.

What next?

Our members are clear that 'Birth to Five' is an important resource that needs to continue to be available to families in hard copy. They believe to not do this will waste tax-payers money and also increase inequalities in health.

We therefore call on the Department of Health to urgently conclude their review of the book with the outcome that provision of the book in hard copy will continue.

We continue to be willing to engage in the review process and will happily share the responses from our members. Further as the Government states that the NHS should have the principle that there is "*no decision about me without me*" we hope that the transparency of this review quickly improves.

We want to thank those members that took the time to complete the online survey which has made it possible to provide this information.

**Professional Officer Team
Unite the Union (in the Health Sector)
October 2011**

² THE GUARDIAN (2011) [Revealed: how NHS cuts are really affecting the young, old and infirm](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/oct/17/revealed-toll-cuts-nhs-services?newsfeed=true) (18/10/11)

³ THE GUARDIAN (2011) [£20bn NHS cuts are hitting patients, Guardian investigation reveals](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/oct/17/nhs-cuts-impact-on-patients-revealed) (18/10/11)