

# C4EO Briefing paper:

## Community Capacity Building – Engaging Parents and Volunteers with Sure Start Children's Centres



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## Contents

1	Foreword and Executive summary	3
2	The context	4
3	Engaging parents and communities: keys to success	5
4	Best practice identified by National College	7
5	Best practice identified by Ofsted	11
6	Best practice identified by C4EO:	
	6.1 Birth and Beyond Community Supporters Programme	17
	6.2 Early Words Together	25
	6.3 Parent Champions: A peer to peer delivery model that informs and engages disadvantaged families who have not previously engaged with early education services	40
7	Other information and examples	55
8	References	58
9	Useful organizations	60

## 1. Foreword

This briefing paper 'Community Capacity Building – Engaging Parents and Volunteers' has been updated to incorporate practice submitted from a C4EO call for practice in 2015. The focus on parental engagement and community capacity building from the original briefing in 2013 still has relevance today. Written originally with children's centres in mind, the briefing has wider relevance to local authorities, VCS and partner organisations working to improve outcomes for babies and young children. Practice examples included from 2013 and earlier were valid at that time and any indication of cost was relevant in 2013. We have retained examples of practice no longer in place, an important inclusion that recognises that challenging budgets and financial restraint have had an impact. The 2015 'call for practice' brings examples that are right up to date and have been subject to the C4EO Validation of Local Practice (VLP) which for the first time drew from voluntary sector delivery and engagement. C4EO would like to thank Dr. Cathy Hamer for her support in producing this briefing.

## Executive Summary

The introduction to this briefing sets the context for ways in which community capacity has been built through engaging parents and volunteers with Sure Start children's centres by reference to the underpinning statutory guidance for local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus as well as for self-evaluation. The keys to success are explored by reference to C4EO's Grasping the Nettle's identification of five golden threads underpinned by the use of peer support i.e. volunteers from the community who are trained to work alongside professionals. Similarly, the work of the WAVE Trust identified six key messages with galvanizing the community being the secret of success.

Best practice identified by the National College for Teaching and Leadership is cited with volunteer programmes recognised as one of the foundations of effective outreach in engaging parents. Examples of best practice identified by Ofsted are included through an innovative approach using volunteers in child protection in Coventry (this is also recognised by C4EO in Southend-on-Sea), an example from East Hasting Children's Centre which has developed an extensive network of volunteers as well as a dynamic parents' forum in Forest First Children's Centre in Hampshire.

C4EO assesses and validates local practice in order to provide evidence of 'what works' and what 'makes a difference' to inspire best practice. The examples given demonstrate how parents supporting parents transformed early years outcomes, embedding sustained change within the community. Volunteer befriending provided the basis for NCT's Birth and Beyond Community Support Programme developed to deliver community-based peer support. The National Literacy Trust built on their Literacy Champions volunteer based programme to develop Early Words Together to promote young children's communication, language and literacy and enable family engagement through the support of peer volunteers. A Parent Champion Model, along with adaptations is described to show the way the intervention works and the impact on parents/families and children as well as the Parent Champion volunteers' journey and development.

Other information and examples include the National Children's Bureau, Parents as REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) volunteers and Community Mothers in Dublin. Contacts for organisations which support volunteering are provided.

## 2. The Context

### 2.1 Sure Start children's centres statutory guidance for local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus, April 2013:

"The chair of the advisory board should ideally be a parent or other member of the community. The children's centre leader may chair the advisory body but this should be as a last resort. Local authorities or providers should offer appropriate support and training to help parents or community members carry out their role effectively.

Children's centres act as a hub for the local community, building social capacity and cohesion:

This contributes to local authorities fulfilling their wider duty in section 1 of the Act about improving the well-being of young children and reducing inequalities. A hub for the local community and building social capital/cohesion are ways of building communities' capacity to improve young children's well-being."

### 2.2 Children's centre self-evaluation form guidance April 2013, No. 130137:

"Making your SEF judgements should involve a critical look at the quality, range and relevance of the universal and targeted services provided for families) on:

#### > The quality and impact of practice and services

How the centre facilitates opportunities to volunteer, to contribute to the running of the centre and to develop formal and informal networks of support. *For example, the steps taken to train volunteers and the centre's work to encourage families to actively contribute to the centre and community.*

#### > The effectiveness of leadership, governance and management

The extent to which families contribute to the centre's performance and delivery, for example, through advisory boards: *e.g. actions taken by the centre or group in the light of feedback from parents provided informally or formally to the advisory board.*

The extent to which resources are used effectively and efficiently to meet agreed local priorities and the needs of targeted children and families living in the area, including the level of innovation in attracting new resources and/or services.

*For example, the centre can provide evidence of the innovative steps taken to obtain more effective use of resources as seen in the increased number of activities provided for targeted groups of users."*

NB: examples in italics show how you might support your judgment.

## 3. Engaging Parents and Communities: Keys to Success

### 3.1 Grasping the Nettle (C4EO) identifies five golden threads:

- The best start in life
- Language for life
- Engaging parents
- Smarter working, better services
- Knowledge is power

#### Engaging parents

Effective intervention with children depends not only on the *fact* of involving their parents, and sometimes wider family, but also on the way of doing so.

The examples in this publication:

- > **repeatedly demonstrate the importance of engaging parents in a collaborative approach, building on their strengths and taking account of their views and experiences**
- > **highlight the need to recognise the problems that families themselves often face and to develop strategies that build confidence and capacity to enable parents to properly fulfill the crucial role they play**
- > **a key feature of several examples is the use of peer support: volunteers from the community who are trained to work alongside professionals, but whose similar life experiences bridge the 'approachability gap' that often prevents the take up of support.**

### 3.2 International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families (WAVE Trust) has 6 key messages:

- Those who prioritise investment in the earliest years secure the best outcomes
- The quality of parenting/care is the key to a successful society
- There could be a major dividend from focused commitment to ensure children arrive at school 'school ready'
- The impact of poor early care can be alleviated by the right experience during school years
- Galvanising the community is the secret of success
- Innovative approaches to social care can provide significant benefits at minimum cost

#### Galvanising the community is the secret of success

The most encouraging form of prevention/intervention is summed up by the phrase 'galvanising community'. This approach to building functional, healthy communities shows the power of an idea adopted by a large number of citizens at the same time, and its characteristics include overcoming the challenge of reaching the most at-risk, and therefore hardest to reach, potential beneficiaries of support.

A nationwide example is the campaign called Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents (SKIP), a government-funded route to transforming the way people think about parenting in New Zealand. This is reported to be enormously successful at raising the public profile of the issue in a positive manner, putting life back into the concepts that older people have wisdom and experience to contribute, and that child rearing is a community as well as parental matter. Above all, the campaign is taking the subject of parenting out of darkness into light and establishing the idea that good parenting is a learned skill – and there's nothing 'wrong' with people who engage in learning it.

Materials relating to parenting come in many forms, including fridge magnets! The high profile, open style of communication the campaign fostered has resulted in the topic of parenting being common in the workplace – even of fathers. SKIP is a truly national community initiative, a benign revolution in the way people live together and raise the next generation, rather than just another parenting programme. The following comment from a community worker is typical of the feedback received: *We feel part of changing the ways parents parent in New Zealand. We feel like we are part of a social transformation that is bigger than us.*

Qualitative analysis of the campaign in a study commissioned to help understand the reasons for the extent of the success distilled the following key success factors:

- a clear, strong, collective vision focused on social change;
- genuine partnership with community;
- a culture of possibility;
- the use of social marketing to promote an agreed message;
- the idea that success breeds success; and
- a positive, universal and non-judgmental approach.

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) Project is a unique, holistic approach to rebuilding a very run-down community so that its children can stay on track through to college and go on to the job market. The goal is to create a 'tipping point' in the neighbourhood so that children are surrounded by an enriching environment of college-oriented peers and supportive adults, a counterweight to the toxic popular 'street' culture that glorifies misogyny and anti-social behaviour. President Obama has called for the creation of 'Promise Neighborhoods' across the USA based on the comprehensive, data-driven approach of the HCZ Project. Its numerous impressive achievements include virtually eliminating school-unreadiness and doubling the percentage of 'advanced' among 4-year-olds, and catapulting 100% of third graders in two of the Academies to achieve grade level or above in the state-wide math programme. In 2009, 106 Harlem children who were engaged in the chess programme won 78 trophies.

The Community Initiative to Reduce Violence is a local Glasgow initiative based on the Boston ceasefire model. This programme involves the whole community, including the police. In its first year it has successfully enrolled more than half the 700 gang members from the east end of Glasgow in a commitment to renounce violence. It has already seen violence by these youths drop by 49%, with a knock-on effect of an 18% reduction in violence among gang members who did not sign up to the initiative.

## **4. Best Practice Identified by National College for Teaching and Leadership (formerly National College for School Leadership)**

### **4.1 Engaging parents through networks**

The National College for School Leadership, now the National College for Teaching and Leadership, identified volunteer programmes as one of the foundations of effective outreach. Innovative ways to engage parents have been identified in a number of children's centres and noted in the case studies. Many children's centres boost parental confidence and self-esteem by offering volunteer training, often leading to accredited recognition.

For example, in Milton Keynes, an NVQ Level 1 in community volunteering has been achieved by a number of parents, with evidence that this can lead on to paid work. There is a clear pathway for the volunteers through the centre and on to further training and employed work.

In Rossendale support for volunteers was identified as exceptional with children's centre leaders investing heavily in the development and training of volunteers linked with the local college to provide accredited programmes. They have identified that some parents are not quite ready for full volunteer training and so have developed pre-volunteer programmes to enable parents to develop their confidence and skills before embarking on volunteer training, to ensure that they are ready.

### **4.2 Links to faith and voluntary organisations**

Children's centres have developed new partnerships within the changing landscape of the sector and decreasing budgets. There were many examples of children's centres linking with voluntary and faith sectors to support their work and build capacity and sustainability, particularly for universal services, where children's centres were now engaging in more complex individual work with families. This frees up outreach staff to engage in targeted work while maintaining the universal element of the service and providing a gateway for families to other support, if, and when, needed. The research highlighted children's centres which have built excellent working relationships with voluntary and faith groups, and have enabled services to continue and extend by supporting local groups. This has sustained the children's centres' work and provided a chance for faith and voluntary groups to access training through the children's centre.

In East Sussex, children's centres in Hastings and St Leonard's are clustered together and many of the universal groups are run by local faith and voluntary groups. These groups know the community well and partnering with them provides the children's centres with a greater depth of knowledge and understanding of the needs of the area, together with chances for increasing community skills and numbers.

In Kent the centre leader of Briary and Poppy children's centre in Herne Bay has responded to reduction in funding and restructuring of other services, which created more demand on the children's centre, by adapting and changing the centre's provision. During the children's centre's initial development, a focus was placed on universal groups; however, the centre needed to work with more vulnerable families in a targeted way. This could have caused a capacity issue; however by actively engaging faith, voluntary and charity groups in the area to provide the universal services and other support linked to the centre's provision, a broad range of universal and targeted services is available. The children's centre has provided training and support for these groups, and established clearly defined roles and expectations for volunteers as well as staff due to the high need of families

*Doing business as we have always done it is unlikely to have any effect in creating a more inclusive, holistic approach to the delivery of public services. At every level, we need to re- think our approach: how we consult, how we engage others, how we meet together, how we celebrate and how we lead.*

Four characteristics of effective community leadership in networks:

1. Sharing leadership with a focus on 'bridging' rather than 'bonding' relationships, processes and actions.
2. Collaborative working which builds social capital and coheres around a shared focus which is child-centred.
3. Joint planning and dialogue which promotes active participation in decision-making for action by all.
4. Designing local strategies for long term system-wide change.

While the accounts given relate to schools, the concepts and key factors in the process of developing community leadership have strong parallels with Children's Centres.

### **4.3 Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa)**

In 1998, the Parent Teacher Associations of Plymouth, Torbay and Devon (PTA@PTD) set up a pilot project to help define what effective and productive partnerships with parents and communities mean in practice. The pilot project ran in 15 primary and secondary schools in Plymouth, Torbay and Devon, over a period of 4 years.

Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa) is based upon the belief that an informed and supportive parent body will do a great deal to raise standards in schools and help children realise their potential.

The EPPa strategy offers a different approach, in that it is parents who provide the leadership, working in partnership with school staff, governors and members of the local community. The advantages of this approach are greater parental support and involvement. Parents can take on much of the administration; they also have natural links with the community and are an untapped skill base. A parent-to-parent approach is seen as less daunting for some people, encouraging wider parental participation.

The EPPa strategy involves working through a parent led 'action team'. In this way, EPPa ensures that parents, not teachers or the governing body, take responsibility for ensuring continuity and co-ordination of projects to support learning. Parents, not headteachers, lead the teams. In the pilot, action teams that were reliant on headteachers to lead were unsustainable.

When parents led, more was achieved; community and parents were more engaged and empowered. However, senior leaders in schools must also be involved. Without the headteacher or other senior management participation, action teams lost the school perspective and did not thrive.

The EPPa Toolkit provides a step-by-step guide to forming an action team, identifying local needs and carrying out projects.

Moving away from teacher-directed projects, apparent in a network such as EPPa, offers parents and communities the opportunity to explore new avenues of involvement with schools. By looking outside the immediate school environment, parent-led action teams can recruit support and resources from the community that will help provide long-term solutions to today's challenges. They can help build capacity in the local community and this, in turn, makes parent networks sustainable and largely independent of school staff.

School leaders who support parent networks can empower parent and community members to access increased resources – material, human and financial – that support not just individual children in schools, but families and extended families, putting learning facilities and opportunities within their reach. A well-developed parent network model of community partnership, with schools at their heart, brings short and long-term gains for students, parents, schools and the community.

#### **4.4 Working Together: Helping community leadership work in practice – what do we know?**

##### **Community conversations and dialogue**

The seminar series: 'Better Together: the power of community conversation' with George Otero of the Center for Relational Learning (at: [www.relationalearning.com](http://www.relationalearning.com)) and John West-Burnham has enhanced our understanding of the importance of dialogue as a tool for building community. We all engage in three different kinds of conversation.

- **Instructional conversations:** We know something and we want others to know it too. Generally the focus is on achieving compliance. The parameters of the conversation are clear and the outcome is pre-determined.
- **Learning conversations:** The focus is set but the outcomes are not yet known. The conversation explores various outcomes and generally comes to an agreement.
- **Community conversations:** This type of conversation is a vehicle to allow everyone to express and share the diverse views they hold. In this conversation, keeping people engaged is more important than achieving a quick outcome. Generally the focus is agreed by the group and the outcome is not preordained. These conversations exist with no prescribed agenda, with nothing necessarily to do as a result of the get-together – a deeper understanding of each other's hopes and fears and an understanding that the agenda is set by the group might be enough in the early stages. A community conversation can be characterised by some of the following questions:
  - What's great about living and working here?
  - How many of us believe or want ...
  - What do we think about ...
  - How are we feeling about ...
  - Is this conversation going anywhere? Where might it go?
  - Something that won't go away for me is ...
  - What do others think about that?

The purpose of a community conversation is to keep people thinking and talking. These questions can help this to happen:

- Can you tell us more to help us to understand your concerns?
- How is what you are saying the same as what 'X' said earlier?
- How do you know that? What have you seen or heard?
- Are we seeing connections between what people have been saying for the last 10 minutes?

Under the right conditions purposeful conversation can do the following:

- generate new knowledge
- enhance shared understanding
- renew hope
- stimulate collective action

**Focus on process:** Schools that most successfully engage with their communities focus on a process of community involvement, which often produces low-cost or no-cost solutions for those most in need.

- Q: What processes do you use to engage with your community or communities?
- Q: How do you ensure that you focus on issues that are important to your community or communities?

**Broad representation:** Broad community participation is vital. Power struggles can prevail over the best interests of children if leadership is left to institutions elected by only a minority of the community.

- Q: How do you engage with the majority of families in developing the school's community dimension?
- Q: What information do you give parents and the wider community to help them to understand local needs?

**Accurate information:** Accurate information allows schools to move community regeneration forward. Trends and patterns collated from a variety of sources - health, social services, police, local businesses - reveal opportunities to raise attainment.

- Q: What additional information do you have about your local area and community?
- Q: How do you use this information to focus activity and investment to raise attainment?

**Independent leadership:** Regardless of context, models of excellent practice seem to have one thing in common: a passionate champion interested only in achieving the very best for children. They are social entrepreneurs who develop leadership in the community.

- Q: Who are the passionate champions in your school, organisation or community?
- Q: How do these social entrepreneurs develop leadership in your community?

Focus on process: Schools that most successfully engage with their communities focus on a process of community involvement, which often produces low-cost or no-cost solutions for those most in need.

Q: What processes do you use to engage with your community or communities?

Q: How do you ensure that you focus on issues that are important to your community or communities?

## 5. Best Practice Identified by Ofsted

### 5.1 Volunteers in Child Protection: A partnership approach between Coventry City Council and Community Service Volunteers

#### Brief description

Volunteers in Child Protection is an innovative approach to support families whose children are the subject of a child protection plan, delivered in partnership between Coventry City Council and Community Service Volunteers (CSV). Following a comprehensive recruitment process, volunteers at CSV are suitably matched to an eligible family.

#### Overview – the provider’s message

'Because volunteers work alone in the family home, it is vital that all referrals are risk-assessed and the initial meeting with the family is led by the project manager. This has the additional advantage of giving the manager a good knowledge of the family and home conditions. Where possible, project managers sit within social care team offices so communication with social workers is excellent. The project uses the *Outcomes Star* tool which both volunteers and families find helpful and a final evaluation is also undertaken with families, volunteers and the referring social workers.'

*Jill Williams UK Development Director, CSV in Child Protection project*

#### Background

The Volunteers in Child Protection project was developed as a response to the recommendations of Lord Laming, following the death of Victoria Climbié and the public inquiry that followed. The findings concluded that:

- > **early intervention helps families to deal with potential crises and can avert more serious interventions in the future**
- > **the community has a role to play in safeguarding the lives of children. Volunteers in Child Protection currently supports families in five local authority areas.**

#### Recruitment

Community Service Volunteers (CSV) undertakes a continuous recruitment process of volunteers who are interested in working intensively with families whose children are the subject of a child protection plan, usually for neglect. The purpose of the Volunteers in Child Protection scheme which is funded by Coventry City Council, is for the volunteers to befriend the families and provide them with practical help and support to tackle the issues that are leading to neglectful parenting. A rigorous selection process, including a detailed personal interview, ensures that only those volunteers possessing the appropriate skills, abilities and value base go forward onto the scheme; others are screened out.

## **Training**

CSV provides volunteers with comprehensive training to enable them to work effectively with the families referred and to deliver the positive change to parenting required. The training helps volunteers to understand the challenge of working with vulnerable families, the skills needed to improve family functioning and the personal impact of their work. Training sessions also provide opportunities for the scheme's project manager to recognise volunteers' strengths and attributes for matching purposes.

## **Referrals**

Social workers understand how volunteers contribute to the support package offered to the family, and the families for whom having a volunteer will prove most effective. For example, families who experience difficulties in meeting their children's complex health needs have been referred to the scheme, and volunteers were allocated to ensure that they attended health appointments and that the children's condition did not deteriorate. Customarily, however, families are referred to the project when long-term neglect is a factor.

The project manager promotes Volunteers in Child Protection at both management and social work team meetings to ensure that social workers remain aware of the services on offer. The senior manager responsible for commissioning Volunteers in Child Protection on behalf of the council commented, 'The most important indicator of the scheme's usefulness to social workers is when it is seen to be successful with a family under challenging circumstances. When that happens, you can be sure that the referrals from the rest of the social worker's team will come rolling in'. The scheme's success means that its reach has recently extended from working with 25 families per year to working with 25 families at any one time in the year. The Council has invested further by funding a partnership with CSV for a Parent Mentoring scheme for families in need.

## **Matching**

A significant strength of the Volunteers in Child Protection scheme is the quality of its matching. This results in very few breakdowns in the relationship between the volunteers and the families they are matched with. Families referred to the scheme can express a preference on the volunteer's age and gender and agree to the match with the volunteer.

According to the project manager, the most successful matches have been where the volunteer has complemented the work of the family's social worker, and they have been able to form a highly effective partnership when working with families. Proper consideration is also given to families' religious and cultural needs, and the project is able to offer a pool of volunteers that reflects the city's cultural diversity. One mother of a family referred onto the scheme said, 'It's nice to speak to someone I can rely on and who sticks with me. My volunteer is calm and really takes a lot of pressure off me. She is not there to judge but she gives me her honest opinion. She is really chilled and it is nice to have her'.

## **Support**

Volunteers receive ongoing supervision from the project manager of Volunteers in Child Protection, who is available to support them informally at any time and provides a six-weekly formal session. The manager supports volunteers by jointly attending regular core groups and review child protection conferences, and ensures that the project continues to meet the family's needs appropriately. The project manager is fully conversant with child protection procedures, the requirement of the scheme to risk-manage information effectively, and ensure that children are safe.

## **Outcomes**

In two thirds of the cases where volunteers have been involved, the family have been 'stepped down' from child protection to a child in need plan. Volunteers remain involved with their allocated families so that positive change can be sustained and the risk of re-referral reduced; the volunteer can stay involved for up to a year. Local data show that none of the children worked with until case closure has been re-referred to social care. For the volunteers, the intervention's successful conclusion often leads to them using their experience to secure permanent employment as family support workers or residential workers and some have gone on to train professionally as social workers.

Where the conclusion of the child protection plan leads to intervention being 'stepped up' to legal proceedings, relevant information from families' connection with the Volunteers in Child Protection project can be included in the social worker's report to court.

## **5.2 Mutual trust and support: East Hastings Children's Centre**

### **Brief description**

This example shows how East Hastings Children's Centre uses well-integrated services from a wide range of professional agencies and an extensive network of volunteers to improve the lives of local children and families.

### **Overview – the centre's message**

'Our staff work as a team with a common aim, shared responsibilities and a culture of celebrating successes. The strength of our partnership is developed through responsive listening, mutual trust and respecting each other's skills and judgments. Working across sectors, the centre achieves a more detailed understanding of the community and is therefore able to meet the individual needs of families and improve their lives, and offering better progression routes. This includes the accredited Children's Centre Volunteer Programme. The mutually supportive ethos of the centre is then mirrored by the community as empowered parents and carers inspire others.' Tracey Rose, Area Coordinator

### **Working in partnership**

Inspectors were impressed by the strength of partnership working evident in the daily professional practice and communications that take place between centre staff, health visitors and midwives based at the centre. Staff from different professional agencies share the premises and are able to meet and talk through issues as a team and move things on 'further and quicker' to the benefit of families. Referrals from one agency to another are completed swiftly without recourse to what staff refer to as 'phone tag', or leaving answerphone messages and then waiting for a reply. Programmes of support for individual families are arranged more easily, avoiding duplication and ensuring a timely response to families in need of support.

### **Information sharing**

The team works well to share pertinent information to improve the quality and timeliness of their support. For the last two years, health authority partners across Hastings have shared information on all new births in the area with children's centre staff. Family outreach workers are able to follow up on any families that have not made contact with the centre and ensure that most families are registered. Over 92% of families with a child under five in the East Hastings area were registered at the centre in 2012 and the attendance rates of target groups, including lone parents, teenage parents and families from minority ethnic backgrounds, are higher than in many other centres.

A wide range of voluntary and professional agencies are represented at monthly meetings. This helps to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the needs of individual families and joint agreement on a support programme, and to review and adapt existing support. During the recent inspection many parents and carers told how the extensive support from staff had led to improvements in their financial security, housing issues, employment prospects, health advice and preparing children for school.

### **Volunteer programme**

A key feature of the centre's success is the opportunity it provides for parents and carers to volunteer and to contribute to the local community. In her role as Volunteer Coordinator, Anne Harrington-Lowe has organised the volunteer programme for families across Hastings and St Leonards for the last five years. As well as regular volunteer support meetings she organises two volunteer training courses a year. The most obvious testimony to the impact of the programme is the wide variety of projects where volunteers actively contribute to the life and work of the centre and provide support for their community.

Currently more than 13 different programmes, including music workshops, Makaton communication sessions with young children, the 'Fun, Young and Informative' group for teenage parents, a drop-in group for mothers with post-natal depression, breastfeeding groups, and one-off community events, are supported and led by volunteers. A newsletter designed to celebrate and publicise the work of the volunteers also keeps them informed of future plans. Monthly volunteer support meetings are held on a drop-in basis, encouraging first-time visitors to enrol in the programme. Established volunteers describe the huge difference that the programme has made to their lives. Some describe breaking a cycle of reliance on medication; others a new-found ability to change harmful lifestyles. All describe renewed self-confidence and an empowerment to provide help, support and guidance to other families in the community.

### **Research papers**

The centre has produced a range of publications that examine and evaluate the effectiveness of specific programmes and partnerships. First-hand evidence from participants provides confirmation of the long-term impact of the centre's work. For a recent publication, parent-volunteers undertook research into the relationship between parental engagement at children's centres and the parents' subsequent involvement in pursuing their own educational activities. In association with the University of Brighton, trained parent-research leaders and parent-volunteers produced a research paper in March 2012 which is beginning to influence the way that East Hastings Children's Centre communicates with parents and carers. The research team presented a paper at the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) annual conference in March 2012.

East Hastings Children's Centre is one of nine children's centres in the Hastings area. It opened in 2006 as a phase 1 centre and provides services for families in the Broomgrove and Old Town districts. There are currently 600 children aged under five years living in the area. Over 70% of children currently registered live in areas classified as within the 30% most disadvantaged areas nationally.

### 5.3 Good practice example: Early Years, Hampshire

#### Brief description

A big challenge for many children's centres is how to involve parents and carers more. Forest First Children's Centre has an excellent and dynamic parents' forum that significantly influences the provision and benefits the local community.

#### Overview – the provider's message

'The parents' forum took a long time to become fully established and has been so successful because of the parents who have been involved. At first, we used to take our ideas for new provision to them and get their views. Over the years, this has changed and now they are the people who propose new activities and sessions. They have the links with other parents and carers in the community and we use their feedback to tailor sessions. They are influential members of our partnership board and their work has helped bring new parents and carers into the children's centre. My advice to others is to persevere, listen, and build up the trust and confidence of your parents' forum – do not give up if attendance dips. You have to believe in them and make sure their opinions are valued.' *Tracie Currie, Centre Leader*

#### The good practice in detail

Inspectors were particularly impressed with the active part that parents and carers played in the centre and how the whole community was involved in its activities. Inspectors reported that, 'The parents' forum is well established and maintains excellent contact with the local community. Its members are excellent at organising events and fundraising. The forum is highly effective, dynamic and has the resources to respond and act swiftly to requests.' This case study explores further why this parents' forum is so successful and the types of activities its members organise.

Members of the parents' forum have clear views about why their group works so well. Here are some of their tips for success:

- Include parents with a mix of personalities, skills and experiences, who have children of different ages. This enables them to work well as a group and cater to the diverse needs of everyone.
- Around eight members works well; any more and decisions are difficult to agree.
- Plan regular meetings around sessions held at the children's centre. This forum meets once a month and are flexible in changing the day to suit members' jobs and childcare arrangements.
- Be represented on the children's centre partnership board. This helps to get to know what is going on in the area, gain support and funding for their play schemes, and influence decision making.
- Ensure that you are visible within the community so that parents and carers can contact the forum members easily. This parents' forum set up a Facebook page to publicise their work, invite more people to join in, and announce their events.

The centre leader ensures that the parents' forum is well supported, particularly with any activities and resources they need. Their children attend the on-site nursery or 'stay and play' sessions while parents attend meetings. Outreach workers help parents to apply for grants, for example from the local council, and have delivered confidence-building training. The forum has its own bank account and can respond quickly in making purchases and taking payments from parents towards trips and activities. Parents make good use of their connections with the children's centre partnership board to raise funds, for example to help part-fund visits for children and parents who cannot afford them. They have also held fun days, raising money through raffles, a 'play bus', stalls, face-painting and a barbeque.

The views of the parents' forum are used well when developing new provision. This feedback was particularly useful when activities were introduced in a new area. Kylie Robinson and Kirsty Lucas, two of the parents, explain: 'If a parent comes to us with an idea, we take it to the parents' forum. Often it is about what their children like doing or making, like craft activities using sticking and gluing, but it can also be for new courses and activities. We work with the centre staff, parents and children to make sure that all needs are met.'

Initially, the parents' forum was set up to organise the holiday play schemes. But two years ago it was decided to take the activities outside the children's centre to enable more people to join in. They use a variety of parks, community and recreation centres to host events and roadshows. The forum is very active in advertising these activities through the children's centre, by talking to parents and carers and dropping leaflets off in schools. Sarah Critchley, one of the parents, sums up how the play schemes have evolved:

*'The play schemes are getting better each year, mainly through getting to know the parents and using their feedback but also through trial and error. We agree different themes with the children's centre staff and adjust dates and times to suit everyone. The play schemes give children and parents good opportunities to mix and build new friendships.'*

The parents' forum members are great ambassadors for the children's centre. They encourage parents and carers who need help to attend and get support. Some of the activities they hold at the children's centre, including the annual Christmas party, have brought the local community together well. This has resulted in more children attending activities and the children's centre is attracting just over 95% of parents, carers and children from its reach area.

### **Provider Background**

Forest First Children's Centre is located in two adjacent buildings on a large housing estate in Fawley, in the New Forest in Hampshire. Outreach activities are provided at a village hall in Langley and a local primary school. It is a phase one children's centre. The centre serves an area in the south east of the New Forest which has around 440 children aged four and under. The area has small towns with a mix of social and private housing alongside rural, isolated areas.

## 6. Best Practice Identified by C4EO

### 6.1 Birth and Beyond Community Supporters Programme

#### The context and rationale:

The Birth and Beyond Community Supporter (BBCS) programme is an innovative community development peer support service designed to provide support to pregnant women and their partners and families with a child aged 0-2 years. The programme focuses on engaging and supporting women and families who are vulnerable or from communities that experience exclusion during the first 1000 days of parenthood.

The importance of support for women and their families during the first 1000 days of parenthood (from early pregnancy to around the child's second birthday) is increasingly recognised in research literature. Timely and adequate maternity care and support is considered to be effective in improving health outcomes during this period. However, evidence suggests that there are persistent inequalities in access to and receipt care and support and outcomes for particular groups of parents. Groups of parents include those who are refugees and asylum seekers, from Black and minority ethnic communities (BME), younger parents and women who have experienced domestic abuse. These parents often tend to access care and support late and therefore do not receive timely interventions, monitoring and screening which may benefit their health and that of their infants. Late initiation of care has been associated with lower socio economic class, level of education, residence in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area, non-white ethnicity, single status, younger age and non-UK place of birth.

The BBCS programme combines local community support with National Childbirth Trust's (NCT) expertise in pregnancy, birth, infant feeding and parent support, perinatal education and training. The programme builds on research evidence on the value of peer support and the benefits of volunteering in improving people's experiences of care, contributing to improvements in public health and reducing inequalities for particularly vulnerable and socially disadvantaged groups. Within the current policy context, in which there is less public funding and yet a widely accepted need to tackle social and health inequalities, models to develop volunteer peer support are a priority. The service reflects the prevailing thinking about enhancing opportunities for development of community networks and social capital, and generation of family and community resilience.

The focus of the service is to provide the social and emotional support for these vulnerable groups of mothers need during pregnancy and the period after birth, to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing and help them to give their children a positive start in life. There is strong evidence from the Family Nurse Partnership (NFP in the USA) that intensive person-centred, strengths-based interventions with young parents and vulnerable families has positive outcomes for the children and for mothers and fathers.

The service aims to achieve positive outcomes for both the mothers who use the service and the volunteers who provide it. Specifically, the service aims to:

- provide a strengths-based, empowering service for mothers that reduces isolation, stress and low mood during pregnancy and the first two years after birth and therefore improves the outcomes of their babies / children.
- recruit and train community volunteers to work as peer supporters, providing them with necessary skills and knowledge to deliver the service and improve their personal confidence, building social capital and enhance opportunities for further training and employment.

### **The practice:**

NCT's birth and beyond community support programme was developed to deliver community-based peer support from volunteer befrienders who were carefully selected before receiving training and on-going supervision and support by a local project manager and NCT trainer, working together.

Some aspects of the programme are 'fixed'. This includes the underpinning core philosophy of a strengths-based approach to supporting women with a commitment to using non-directive listening skills, and building relationships of trust and respect to improve emotional well-being. As well as listening and empowering through positive supportive relationships, volunteers signpost to reliable sources of information and other relevant services.

Other aspects of the programme are 'flexed'. Local managers, employed in each of the four pilot areas, who were experienced community development leaders added value to the development of the model, and were able to 'flex' aspects of the operation of the training and the support service according to local opportunities and their judgement of needs.

In all pilot areas the programme was developed and implemented by:

- **Establishing and sustaining partnerships and collaborations** with local health and social care professionals, children's centre managers and strategic officers and professionals working within voluntary and community support organisations. These included midwives, health visitors, mental health and social services and organisations, such as the NSPCC, Homestart and Bradford Action for Refugees.
- **Involving stakeholders in development of the service** to identify ways of working together, cross referring and signposting to each other's' services
- **Recruiting volunteers** with a direct understanding of the experiences and concerns of local families, awareness of cultural beliefs and values and understanding of the day to day challenges for mothers.
- **Providing Open College Network (OCN) accredited training** delivered by NCT practitioner trainers who brought expertise in pregnancy, birth, infant feeding, parent support and perinatal education and training.
- **Training and supervising volunteers** as perinatal peer supporters known as Birth and Beyond Community Supporters (BBCSs) to support local mothers and engage with local services.
- **Providing support to mothers** in local community settings.

### **Different Operational models**

**Development and piloting** of the programme in four areas of England (Burnley, Catterick, West Yorkshire and West Midlands) resulted in two operational models of training and service delivery which were flexed according to local needs.

**BBCS as an adjunct service working through children's centres** - the service provided in Dudley and Birmingham was integrated into existing children's centre services. Children's centre managers wanted to work closely with NCT and all the recruitment, volunteer training and parent support activity took place within this setting. After training, operational supervision of volunteers was provided by children's centre staff. Almost all the support provided to parents by volunteer peer supporters was provided through established children's centre drop-in and postnatal groups.

**BBCS as a community outreach community support service** - in the three other areas the service was flexed in response to local circumstances and needs resulting in the provision of community outreach services. Volunteers were recruited through extensive outreach work in local communities and through awareness raising events. The establishment of partnerships with a range of statutory health and voluntary agencies for example midwifery and health visiting services, emotional health teams, and voluntary services such as refugee and family support organisations resulted in women being referred to the service for additional one-to-one support.

Women and families were visited by local project managers and matched with trained BBCSs who provided support over a number of weeks. Home visits were provided when required, after careful assessment, and new group support activities and services were run in community venues for example local halls or rooms provided by voluntary support organisations. Activities and services included groups led by trained BBCSs with opportunities for mothers to participate in facilitated discussion designed to build confidence to talk, discuss issues and concerns and develop strategies to deal with problems. For women and families who are socially marginalised and often face multiple problems, including long-term health conditions, acute poverty and social and emotional problems, a community outreach approach was vital. This involved identifying affected families and their particular circumstances and needs, including any particular cultural or language issues.

#### **Evidence and evaluation:**

Researchers in NCT's Research and Quality Department, with external quality assurance from Charities Evaluation Service, conducted a mixed-methods evaluation across the four service delivery areas to:

- Describe how the service was developed and established locally; and
- Assess the impact of the programme on the volunteers and mothers supported.

This included:

- Before and after questionnaires with trained volunteers and women supported
- Use of validated outcome measures
- Interviews and focus groups with volunteers and women supported
- Interviews with local programme managers, national management and external partners/stakeholders.
- Use of local project monitoring systems

#### **Performance measures for the programme included:**

- Evidence of the partnership working and local collaborations
- Number of volunteers recruited and trained
- Number of volunteering hours
- Number of mothers supported
- Positive feedback on the programme from volunteers, mothers and external partners
- Positive outcomes for volunteers:
  - development of knowledge and skills,
  - confidence
  - personal development specifically opportunities for further progression
- Positive outcomes for mothers included:
  - Improved access to services
  - Reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation
  - Reduced feelings of low mood and improved confidence

During the evaluation it was not possible to collect much impact data on mothers receiving support where the programme was implemented as an **adjunct service**, so further evaluation is required making adjustments based on lessons learned during this initial pilot.

## **Findings**

The evaluation findings suggest that the programme, as implemented during the pilot, provides a feasible way of engaging and training volunteers to provide a service that is valued by mothers, contributes to reducing isolation and low mood and improves their sense of well-being, at relatively little cost. Volunteers have benefited from the service personally, gaining a range of transferable skills and knowledge and enhanced self-efficacy that will enrich their lives beyond the lifetime of the project.

### **Key successes/achievements of the 3 year programme included:**

A range of partnerships and involvement in the programme with local statutory health and social care services including midwives and health visitors, emotional health teams and social services and voluntary organisations supporting particular vulnerable groups for example those supporting refugees and asylum seekers, young parents, and families living in difficult social circumstances.

1. 199 trained volunteers from groups that are often difficult to engage:
  - 59% identified themselves as from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) group;
  - 38% were under the age of 29; and
  - 48% of volunteers recruited in West Yorkshire were asylum seekers or refugees.
2. Delivery of approximately 3500 hours of volunteer support to mothers with each volunteer providing a minimum of 2 hours of support a week over three months.
3. Provision of a range of support to mothers including:
  - signposting mothers to relevant services including health and social care services;
  - accompanying mothers to appointments and sometimes providing transport;
  - providing emotional support one-to-one;
  - facilitating mother-to-mother social contact in groups;
  - providing practical support with young children and household tasks; and
  - attending established postnatal support groups in children's centres.
  - establishing new drop-in groups for pregnant women and mothers with babies and young children and in Catterick area use of structured activities to facilitate discussion, identity problems and focus on solutions
4. Support provided to 444 mothers either one-to-one, in a group or using both of these approaches.

5. Mothers came onto the project with a range of social, emotional and health needs. They presented with one or more of the following issues:
  - limited knowledge of and access to available services and worries about ability to communicate or express concerns and needs to professionals;
  - feelings of loneliness and isolation including parents who were new to the areas in which they lived, some with little English,
  - low levels of confidence
  - mothers who were under the care of other agencies for example mental health or social services
  - poor mental wellbeing including feelings of sadness, low mood, stress and depression exacerbated by specific events such loss of a baby, experiences of domestic abuse , loneliness and difficulties with immigration
  - pregnancy - including lone pregnancy, worries about pregnancy and giving birth
  - coping as a mother with a new baby or a mother with several young children
  - little access to baby equipment and other resources
  
6. Positive evaluation of the training and support experience was provided by 99% (143) volunteers on post training questionnaires, 72 % (47) at six months post training 38 volunteers during interviews. Benefits included:
  - Significant improvements in understanding of the peer support role and knowledge and skills needed to provide effective support to mothers.
  - Between 88% and 97% reported an improvements in their understanding of key elements of the peer supporter role after training including:
    - The importance of building supportive relationships
    - Providing emotional support
    - Listening and encouraging
    - Signposting to services
    - Knowledge of the boundaries of support
    - Maintaining confidentiality
  - 96% of volunteers felt the training had made a difference to their understanding of the role
  - 92% felt ready to offer support after training
  - Improved self-confidence and self-worth as a result of taking on a social valued and recognised role and feelings of making a difference.
  - 74% of volunteers reported feeling more confident as a result of taking part in the programme (training and providing support to mothers)
  - Increased awareness and shift in attitudes about different communities as a result of training with and supporting women from diverse cultural backgrounds.
  - Personal development including opportunities to go on to further education and/or take up employment:
    - 64 volunteers became employed or went onto study further
    - 61 volunteers took up further volunteering, ran stakeholder events and took part in training health professionals on the needs of vulnerable groups.
  - Formation of a new community support service for parents (Parents4Parents) by volunteer BBCSs trained in the North Yorkshire area.

7. In the three areas providing community outreach services, baseline data was collected from 54 mothers receiving one-to-one support and 3 month post support data was collected from 35 mothers. All 35 mothers who provided feedback at three months and 19 mothers who took part in interviews provided a positive evaluation of the support they received through contact with the service.

Assessments of women before and at 3 months after support together with interviews provide evidence that the programme may be helping mothers. Benefits included:

- Improved access to services and support which included:
  - an increase in knowledge of services reported by 85% of mothers compared with 63% at baseline;
  - Improved confidence to access services reported by 89% of mothers compared with 61% at baseline;
  - increased in use of children's centre and mental health services reported by 46% and 20% respectively.
  - Improved feelings of wellbeing with fewer women reporting feelings of isolation (34%) and low mood (23%) compared with baseline of 73% and 50% respectively.
- 83% of women reported that contact with the service had made a positive difference to their mood.
- 91% of women reported feeling more positive about their life and situation as a result of contact with the service.
- Personal development with seven mothers taking up BBCS training after receiving a period of peer support.

Positive evaluation of the programme by external partners who saw the programme as unique, mutually beneficial and ensuring effective support for women and families addressing more of their needs. They saw the need for the programme to continue beyond the funding period.

### **Sustaining the practice:**

BBCS as a community outreach service is sustainable by embedding the service provision within other existing voluntary support services that specifically work with engaging with women who are vulnerable and are at risk of social exclusion. The programme has demonstrated this as an effective means of engagement with these groups. Sustainable models of delivery are being developed in conjunction with other, local, voluntary sector organisations who are working closely with those most in need of this service.

The programme was funded by the Department of Health's – volunteering funding stream from the 'Health and Social Care Volunteering Fund' for three years. The programme funding ended in September 2014. However, while NCT are no longer running the programme, in North Yorkshire the programme continues as volunteers have set up a new parents' organisation to continue the work.

### **Costs of commissioning the delivery of the OCN accredited peer support training**

Depending on specific local circumstances e.g. availability of venue for training, location and recruitment of volunteers being undertaken by the partner organisation, the 30 hour training, Open College Network accredited course with 6 sessions of reflective support for the volunteers once trained, can be commissioned for approximately £5000.

## **Overall assessment of benefit**

The volunteers, mostly mothers themselves, gained from their engagement in the programme as well as contributing substantially and generating value and are therefore regarded as beneficiaries along with mothers receiving support.

## **Learning**

A number of learning points have been identified and practice recommendations made to inform future roll-out of the programme. These include:

- the value of employing managers with community development expertise;
- be flexible and responsive to local needs whilst retaining the fixed aspects of programme delivery.
- developing innovative ways to respond to volunteers' education and support needs including the offer of study skills as part of training for volunteers with limited formal education;
- provide suitable training for example safeguarding, clear boundaries and proactive supervision of volunteers in areas where volunteers work with vulnerable families with complex needs;
- use of established volunteers as mentors for newly trained peer supporters;
- the provision of additional training in person-centred counselling skills an/or the Solihull Approach to working with parents with complex needs, based on theories of containment, reciprocity and behaviour management;
- promote open communication between local programme management and local professionals and the need to communicate the philosophy of the programme when working with partner agencies;
- proactively engage with external stakeholders whilst retaining relative independence
- locate where possible community outreach services in community venues including those provided by local voluntary agencies who work with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.
- establish clear boundaries of responsibility when working as an adjunct service;
- consider the size of a manager's caseload as this will have implications for quality;
- Carry out further monitoring and evaluation to explore implementation of this complex programme in other settings.

## **C4EO Golden Threads:**

### **Know your communities**

It is essential to carry out outreach work with the communities you intend to support to assess need and flex your service to meet those needs in terms of training and delivering support to vulnerable families.

### **Unite to succeed**

NCT has worked extensively with local authorities, children's centre strategic managers, professionals from local health and social care agencies and voluntary agencies to develop a programme of support that with engage families that are hard to reach and who don't engage. Programme support is seen as mutually beneficial enabling opportunities for intensive support to be provided addressing more needs.

### **Together with children, parents & families**

Involving service users in the design and delivery of the programme in the three community outreach areas ensured that the programme engaged with those who most need support. The expertise and knowledge held by parents and families should be respected, and their capacity to share responsibility should be recognised and nurtured.

### **Prove it - making change happen**

By conducting and collating pre and post data promising evidence of the impact of the programme on both mothers and volunteers was obtained. Outreach work and partnership working with programme beneficiaries and external stakeholders proved the need and demand for the service.

### **You can do it**

Promoting resilience and confidence of both volunteers and mothers supporters is key to positive outcomes. The programme raised the aspirations of some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded women in society through its strength based and empowering approach.

### **From good to great - leadership vision and embedding is key**

The local project teams worked tirelessly with project beneficiaries and external stakeholders to shape the vision of the service.

## 6.2 Early Words Together

### Introduction

Early Words Together, formally Literacy Champions, is a targeted National Literacy Trust programme that aims to develop the communication, language and literacy of two to five year olds and enable family engagement through the support of peer volunteers.

### Background

In 2008, the National Literacy Trust undertook a review of research into the role of families and the home environment in developing children's literacy skills. The following key findings informed the focus for partnerships with communities and local areas:

**Families:** parental involvement is a more powerful force for academic success than other family background variables.

**Early years:** the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and longer-lasting the effects.

**The home:** parents have the greatest influence on the achievement of young people by supporting learning in the home rather than in school.

**Role models:** even at age 16 parental interest in a child's reading is the single greatest predictor of achievement.

**Disadvantage:** rates of low literacy are highest in disadvantaged communities and low literacy is a barrier to social mobility.

In 2009, the National Literacy Trust received funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) to work with local authorities to improve literacy levels by developing community-wide partnerships focused on literacy. This work was underpinned by knowledge of the importance of the home learning environment and focused on extending literacy support to vulnerable families by involving a greater range of partners.

In some areas, consultation with families raised concerns that suitable support was not available or, where it was, it was considered too formal, too intimidating and too hard to access. The consultation highlighted that community-based provision was needed, offering peer support on an informal and one-to-one basis. In response, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council developed a Literacy Champions training programme for frontline workers and volunteers to ensure that literacy support reached the individuals and communities in most need. With the support of the National Literacy Trust the Literacy Champions programme in Rochdale has been replicated across a number of local authorities and adapted to local needs, effectively filling gaps in local support for literacy.

In 2011 the National Literacy Trust drew on the training and expertise developed in Rochdale to develop a peer support project specifically focussed on early intervention and the support of families with children aged two to five. The programme was delivered to over 2,000 families with over 600 volunteers between 2011 and 2013, across 25 local authorities or organisations. Internal evaluation demonstrated positive outcomes including:

- 72% of parents reporting an increase in children's enjoyment of books
- "My child now really enjoys reading stories with me and it is the project that has given him that enthusiasm."
- An increase in children's basic literacy skills. 81% of parents reported that their child was now more able to listen and join in with stories. Two months after the families' time with their volunteer, practitioners reported that nearly half (46%) had improved from emergent expected levels in terms of their speaking and listening skills. 52% improved from emergent to expected levels in terms of their engagement with books and stories.
- An improvement in children's early literacy behaviours, with 55% of parents reporting and increase in how often their child asked to hear a story.
- An increase in parents' awareness of the importance of their role in supporting their children's literacy (the home learning environment). 75% of parents reported an increase in their awareness of sharing books with their child. 80% of parents reported an increase in their awareness of the importance of talking with their child.
- "It has made a lot of difference because I now have a better understanding of how to support my child at home – I can be like his teacher!"
- Improved parental confidence in their ability to support their children's literacy and learning. 88% of parents reported an increase in confidence in sharing books with their child, 77% reported an increase in their confidence in talking with their child, and 83% reported an increase in their confidence in visiting the library.
- Increased parental engagement in supporting their children's literacy development, with 53% of parents reporting an increase in the number of time per week that they share books with their child.

Despite these benefits, it was identified that delivery settings were less able to target the programme to those with the greatest need than originally anticipated. A survey by The Children's Society found that four in ten parents had never used a children's centre because they had not heard of the service and almost three quarters of parents were not aware of the services offered by their local centre<sup>6</sup>.

In 2013, the National Literacy Trust was granted two years of funding through the Department for Education National Prospectus Grants to take the project forward. Renamed Early Words Together, the programme seeks to address the issues identified in earlier delivery by bringing together local partners and services to identify and support families in improving the home learning environment for two to five year olds.

### **The Practice:**

Early Words Together was delivered in 12 local authorities across England. One further authority, Bradford, was recruited to the programme in April 2014. An average of 120 children's centres and settings delivered the programme.

Early Words Together has two main components:

- The identification, referral and signposting of targeted families by local authority multi-agency teams and other community partners
- Volunteer-led engagement and learning activities with families in early education settings

### **The identification, referral and signposting of families**

During 2013, the National Literacy Trust explored critical indicators that demonstrate the quality and impact of home learning. These indicators drew primarily on research around the home learning environment and its impact on early years communication, language and literacy<sup>7</sup>. The National Literacy Trust also conducted research of parents of three to five year olds to explore what they do to support their children's literacy development in the home. From these combined findings, the National Literacy Trust identified three early home learning indicators that were shown to be associated with greater cognitive abilities later in life:

- The frequency of book sharing in the home
- The frequency of songs and rhymes sung in the home
- The quantity of books in the home, either owned or borrowed

The National Literacy Trust developed the programme framework, resources and training and worked closely with five local authorities to shape the programme and approach. These authorities, who formed a reference group, were:

- London Borough of Croydon
- Derbyshire County Council
- Middlesbrough Council
- Rochdale Metropolitan District Council
- Sheffield City Council

Potential referral and signposting partners who could extend children's centres' reach to target families were identified by the reference group (see Figure 1 below) and supported through workshops across the 12 delivery areas to understand the importance of the home learning environment and tasked with promoting the programme to the families they connected with using the early home learning indicators.

Figure 1. Early Words Together referral partners



A central coordinator was identified from each partner local authority. They identified around 10 children's centres per area to deliver the programme. The National Literacy Trust trained coordinators and children's centre staff in the delivery of the programme, in targeting families using the early home learning indicators and in recruiting, training and managing volunteers.

#### Volunteer-led engagement and learning activities

Early Words Together is delivered to targeted families with children aged two to five through small group sessions of one and a half hours, once a week for six weeks, within a children's centre or early learning environment.

Delivery partners identify volunteers from their own service users, from links with other services such as family learning, from local colleges, and from the wider community in conversation with local volunteering agencies or community organisations. Training is cascaded to volunteers locally, giving them the skills and confidence to support families to:

- Understand why they are important to their child's reading and language development
- Adopt effective activities to enrich their play, engagement and attachment with their child
- Increase their child's literacy, communication and language development through integrating simple activities into daily life

The programme is informed by research. Activities are structured around the seven areas identified within the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education research as effective home learning activities:

- Sharing books and stories
- Singing songs and rhymes
- Playing with other children
- Playing with letters and sounds
- Painting and drawing
- Visiting the library
- Going out on trips and exploring the environment

A volunteer toolkit provides guidance on effective activities while encouraging volunteers to tailor sessions to meet the particular needs of families and interests of the child. The importance of parent/child interaction and developing strong speaking and listening skills underpins all activities. In the DfE funded programme, families are also helped by children's centre staff and volunteers to choose three books from an age-appropriate reading list. These books are theirs to keep and take home, along with a memory book and family resource booklet that has more ideas and suggestions for activities that can be continued at home.

Setting staff debrief with volunteers after each sessions to encourage reflection, address any concerns and to provide support with planning for the next session. Staff are encouraged to provide opportunities for volunteers to share their practice and learning with each other. For example, an area-wide peer learning event can create opportunities for volunteers to give short presentations, furthering their skills development. All staff are encouraged to consider progression opportunities for volunteers. In areas of delivery this has included employment within the setting or support into further learning and development.

### **Training, resources and support**

During the DfE funded period the National Literacy Trust provided:

- Training and guidance for delivery partners
- A training plan, presentation and activities for cascading training to volunteers
- Programme resources (volunteer toolkit, memory booklet for children and family resource book) for up to 200 families and 60 volunteers
- Training and promotional films
- Templates for posters and leaflets, plus postcards for referrers, sign-posters and families
- Access to the coordinator zone of the National Literacy Trust's website – an online community for early years settings and schools with programme resources, tools, advice and support
- Access to National Literacy Trust staff support during implementation, including regular emails, telephone support, good practice forums and sharing
- Evaluation tools to support tracking and evidence of impact
- External evaluation of both children and families as well as views of local authority staff (see section 3 below)

Resources from the DfE funded pilot stage are available to download from the National Literacy Trust website under Open Government Licence. Printed copies of the latest versions which have been further developed and improved based on user feedback, are available with the new package of resources and training (see costs below).

## Partnership involvement

Evaluation was undertaken by:

Coventry University who looked at the impact of the intervention on children, families and the home learning environment in the 12 local authorities (using the Pearson Pre-school Language Scale), interviews and surveys with families.

See report [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0002/6473/EWT\\_Final\\_Report-and-OPM](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0002/6473/EWT_Final_Report-and-OPM) who considered the impact on children's centre practice, referral working, wider local authority practice and the role of volunteers

While children's centres were initially targeted as the lead delivery partners, a variety of settings were involved with delivering Early Words Together, including schools, libraries and community centres. This was partly to engage and attract the target families but also as between 2013-15 there was considerable restructuring of early years and children's centres across most of the local authorities.

Postcards were designed by the National Literacy Trust to remind multi-agency professionals of the early home learning indicators within their informal conversations with families. The referral process included a simple invitation form where families could be invited to attend, containing minimal information, including age of child and contact details for the children's centre lead to hold following data protection procedures.

## Evaluation findings

Coventry University analysed data from all delivery areas, excluding Bradford who joined the programme in the second year. Six areas were selected for closer analysis which included interviews and focus groups with families. These were selected to represent a variety of local

authorities in terms of size, urban / rural, outside London, etc. and included Croydon, North Yorkshire, Rochdale, Wiltshire, Sutton and Lambeth. OPM surveyed all 12 areas and looked in detail at delivery in Croydon, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Sutton and Wiltshire.

Coventry University undertook a standardised assessment of the language/ early literacy skills of children using the receptive language subscale of the Pearson Preschool Language Scales. This assessment was first conducted before the child took part in the programme and then three months later. 115 children were assessed at pre-test and 72 were assessed at post-test (37.4% attrition from study over three months).

The evaluation has shown that Early Words Together:

- Significantly improved children's understanding of spoken language. At pre-test, the average performance of the children assessed was 77.1, indicating that the majority of children assessed were underperforming on their understanding of spoken language relative to where they should be for their age. This in itself suggests that the programme was generally reaching the right families. Three months later these children's average score had increased to 82.9 – an increase of over five standardised score points, indicating that the children's vocabulary levels were developing faster than we would predict from normal maturation (i.e. they were catching up with peers). This puts the average post-test performance of the children sampled just short of the normal range.

This improvement is both statistically significant ( $p=.0062$ ) and educationally meaningful. When we look at the number of children in the normal range at each time point, 30.5% of the children were in the normal range at pre-test, and this increased to 43.1% of the same children just three months later.

This impact was particularly pronounced for girls who participated in the programme. That is, when we look at the impact of the programme on the language comprehension scores of girls and boys who participated, we see that the boys' scores increased modestly from 76.2 to 78.9. The female children showed an increase from 78.6 to 89.6 - a change of 11 standardised score points in around four and a half months.

Coventry University also analysed 776 toolkits capturing parental feedback, and held interviews and focus groups with 106 families. Local authorities collected case studies. Not only were children's verbal skills improved, Early Words Together also:

- Significantly improved children's enjoyment of sharing books overall (increase from 72.1% to 87.1% of families reporting good levels of enjoyment). The impact is particularly significant for target families, where 76.7% more parents reported that their child enjoyed sharing books at the end of the programme;

*"He does now, but he didn't before, he will bring a book and say 'Mummy read'. It has really boosted that desire to read." Parent, Rochdale*

- Significantly improved children's enjoyment of joining in with songs and rhymes (increase from 75.5% to 88.3% of families reporting good levels of enjoyment). Again, the impact was particularly significant for target families, where 77.7% more parents reported that their child enjoyed joining in with songs and rhymes at the end of the programme;
- Increased the amount of parent-child talk in 88.1% of target families and increased parents' understanding of the importance of talking to children (68.5% of target families);

*"I have become a lot calmer, I have a better understanding, I don't rush X into explanations, I give him a chance to process his words now and actually tell me what he is wanting." Parent, North Yorkshire*

- Increased parents' confidence in sharing books with their children (78.3% of target families) and in singing with their children (57.6% of target families);

*"I have learnt lots of tips from my volunteer about reading with my son and interacting with my son. I find it difficult before." Parent*

- Impacted the quality of children's home learning environment through significantly increasing the frequency of book sharing (91.3% improvement in target families) and joining in with songs and rhymes (85% improvement in target families), and by increasing 11 abilities (22.3%).

*"We have learnt to communicate more and I treat him more as a little person who knows a lot rather than a little person who doesn't know anything." Parent*

There appeared to be a particular appreciation of Early Words Together from parents and children who were from English as an additional language (EAL) homes. There were 18 spontaneous references to the benefits of the programme for such families included in the open ended responses to questions in the toolkits, and EAL parents who were interviewed also mentioned the benefits of their children being able to speak English, share English books and learn English rhymes.

*“When she is at home with me, she is by herself, she goes to nursery now, she comes back speaking more confident in English, as we speak Chinese at home. Now she is half and half. Before the centre she couldn’t speak and get friends. More confident, so she can do things for herself.”* Parent, Croydon

Parents also mentioned that engaging with Early Words Together now meant they were attending other courses at their children’s centre.

*“After Early Words Together, I went on the EAL course.”* Parent, Croydon  
*“I am doing maths and English with the children’s centre.”* Parents, Wiltshire

In addition to these early findings, Early Words Together has also been referenced in Ofsted reports:

*“Early Words’ sessions effectively help parents support their children’s communication and language development. The sessions are particularly effective for Portuguese and other groups who speak English as an additional language”.*  
Lambeth Ofsted inspection, Stockwell Children’s Centre, July 2014

*“Some activities, such as ...‘Early Words Together’, focus very specifically on promoting children’s communication and language development, and tracking shows that good progress is being made”.* Lichfield District Group c/o Charnwood Children’ Centre, WS13 7PH, May 2014

*“Volunteering opportunities at the Centre have enabled family members to build their confidence and progress into training and eventual employment”.* Darnall Children’s Centre, OFSTED Report February 2014

### **Further evaluation evidence**

OPM’s evaluation comprised:

- A series of initial scoping interviews with stakeholders to help them understand the programme and localities’ initial experience of implementation;
- A Year One online survey of 89 local authority stakeholders (April-May 2014);
- A follow-up Year Two online survey of 132 local authority stakeholders (February-March 2015);
- A series of depth interviews with stakeholders in five of the 13 project areas (Croydon, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Sutton and Wiltshire);
- An analysis of project costs incurred by local authorities

The evaluation report from OPM found:

- Early Words Together (EWT) had been very positively received by local authority stakeholders in areas where the programme operated during 2014-15. The targets it set for participating areas – including volunteers trained, families recruited and sessions run – created some anxiety and frustration early on, but the central programme team, local co-ordinators and settings worked hard to meet those targets. In spite of the pressure to achieve ambitious results, the overall response to the programme from staff and volunteers in settings has been enthusiastic and their belief in its impact strongly evident. They have felt the programme to be a good use of their time, impactful for settings, volunteers and, in particular, families.
- Programme management and resources: Positivity was high in relation to management of the programme and the materials provided, with nine out of ten local stakeholder survey respondents judging the range of free books excellent or good (91.5%). At least seven out of ten were also positive about the ordering and delivery of free books (72.4%); the volunteer training (70.3%); and the volunteer toolkit (70.2%).
- Recruiting families to participate: The programme aimed to engage 2000 families in total. With 1,846 participating by January 2015 (and 2,114 families recruited in total) that target was achieved. The type of families recruited was also a focus of attention for the programme, with criteria established to ensure an emphasis on the most in need.

Two thirds of survey respondents (67%) believe the programme has enabled them to increase their contact with families who are not regular service users, and over half (55.9%) believe the programme has generated new contact with families previously unknown to or not accessing children's centre services.

That not all respondents were confident of these impacts suggests that some participating families were in some cases already known to settings. This was reflected in case study interviews, where it was clear that participating families were sometimes outside the strict criteria for inclusion – either to help achieve target numbers, to involve families with literacy needs who it was judged would benefit, or in order to reach and impact on target families more subtly through positioning EWT as a more universal offer.

Local authorities were creative in engaging families:

- In Bristol they worked with very vulnerable families who needed a prior relationship to build trust.
- In Sutton they only recruited families from the borough's 30% most deprived Super Output Areas.
- In Lambeth they worked with their Social Care team to identify and engage very disadvantaged families, plus they worked with large numbers of families with English as an additional language.
- Rochdale focussed on low income families; the unemployed; BME and single parent families.
- Sheffield worked with the drug and rehabilitation team to engage families that were transitioning from that programme. Barriers to engagement were relapse or children being taken into care. Through volunteers they also engaged families from the Roma/Slovak communities; unemployed white working class families and teenage mums.

*"Families with more issues are using Early Words Together as a way of solving some of their problems...parents who have never been read to are now using and enjoying books with their children." Sheffield coordinator*

- Recruiting volunteers to support: The programme over-achieved against its targets in terms of volunteer recruitment. Just as family recruitment was a challenge for some areas and some settings, so volunteer recruitment proved challenging for others. Around half of respondents (52.2%) thought the programme had enabled them to grow the pool of volunteers available to support local families. As the case study interviews highlighted, volunteers were recruited in a range of ways and from a variety of backgrounds. It was widely agreed that the demands on EWT volunteers were higher than for most programmes, and that this raised the bar in terms of what was required from those volunteering. For some co-ordinators and children's centre staff, this meant that confident and professionally experienced volunteers were better suited to the role, whilst others took the opposite view and favoured peers from within parents' own communities.
- Engaging referral partners: The most persistently challenging aspect of engagement has been in relation to partner organisations, and in particular those which it was hoped would refer families into the programme. Just under half of survey respondents (47%) thought that the programme had increased the number of partner agencies who understood the importance of home learning environments. Both the survey and case study interviews showed this to be the area which settings most struggled with across the participating authorities. Whilst there were some good examples of partner relationships being forged through the programme and of key partners being 'won over' by the programme's potential to help their service users, overall partner engagement remained lower than intended. The case study interviews have nonetheless highlighted some very positive examples of the programme building strong support amongst local partner organisations, and of EWT acting as a vehicle for forging closer working relationships with partners.
- Impact on children, families and home learning environments: Local stakeholders show high levels of confidence in the programme's positive impact on children, families and home learning environments. Around nine out of ten agreed with the statements that: Early Words Together has had a positive impact on raising the confidence of parents to support children's communication, language and literacy (94.7%); that the programme had a positive impact on improving children's communication, language and literacy (90.5%); and that families' home learning environments had improved (89.3%).

Interviewees emphasised how parents' confidence, skills and understanding had grown through the course of the programme, and evidence that children's experiences of play and learning at home were changing.

Children's centres are also seeing parents engaged through EWT remaining involved in other children's centre projects and activities – 9 out of 10 survey respondents felt that the programme had helped to enable parents or other family members to get involved in a children's centre project (89.4%).

- Impact on volunteers: Confidence in the programme's impact on the skills and capacity of volunteers is high – eight out of ten survey respondents (80.9%) thought that EWT had developed volunteers' skills. Through case study interviews, volunteers themselves reiterated the valuable experience the programme had provided, whether in terms of skills and confidence beneficial to work or study, or to their own parenting. The National Literacy Trust's own survey of volunteers corroborates this picture, with almost all respondents (96.5%) satisfied with their volunteering experience overall, and more than eight out of ten (84.4%) satisfied that they had impacted positively on families.

Case study interviewees highlighted the benefits to children's centres in terms of an increased volunteer resource for them to mobilise beyond the life of EWT specifically. In fact, this process of EWT volunteers migrating into other volunteering activities within children's centres or related services is already evident. Some co-ordinators have also reported that volunteers have gone on to gain employment directly as a result of experience gained through volunteering with EWT.

- Impact on children's centres: Three quarters of survey respondents (75.5%) reported that EWT had a positive impact on the skills and /or confidence of children's centre staff to engage with families most in need of support with early learning at home. Children's centre managers often encouraged colleagues to involve themselves in the programme as a route to developing their professional practice. Some managers have also seen EWT as a useful vehicle for helping less confident staff learn how to engage with families and build stronger relationships with them. In addition, case study interviewees described how the programme had built the capacity of their volunteers – volunteers who in some cases were becoming involved in other children's centre activities.

*"We had members of staff who were quite quiet and needed help engaging with parents... Early Words Together gave them a focus for their conversations with parents. They were worrying initially... but really enjoyed getting to know a family in depth."*  
Children's Centre Manager

### **Behavioural change**

*"I would recommend it to everybody – my child's speech has come along a lot."*  
Parent

*"We now enjoy reading different books and communicating better. I learnt the importance of speaking with my daughter."*  
Parent

*"The intervention has been successful and should continue as a way of readying children for nursery but also for the sharing of information, allowing us to target the needs and abilities of all children but especially our vulnerable children and families."*  
Nursery Teacher, Hemlington Hall Academy

### **Benefits**

Initial research findings indicate that Early Words Together is successfully bringing about the following benefits:

- Improving children's school readiness
- Enhancing multi-agency working
- Extending outreach and skills development in children's centres

## Solutions to overcome barriers

Barriers / Challenge	Mitigation / solutions
<p data-bbox="134 367 762 584">During 2014 and 2015 there was considerable restructure and reorganisation within children's centres in all the partner local authorities. This reduced capacity, focus and motivation while staff turnover meant trained staff were lost.</p> <p data-bbox="134 629 715 696">The delivery timeframe and targets were ambitious and pressured.</p>	<p data-bbox="815 367 1433 618">We encouraged centres and local authorities to train more staff than needed. We also extended delivery to schools and community centres (such as women's refuges; refugee centres and mosques) to reach families when local centres were closed.</p> <p data-bbox="815 663 1458 770">Engaging local partners and services helped to reach enough target families. Families also started to refer friends and neighbours.</p>
<p data-bbox="134 808 767 987">Local partners could be slow to start referrals, even when multi-agency teams were initially enthusiastic, as the programme could be perceived as a threat to established practice.</p>	<p data-bbox="815 808 1417 987">It became more effective to conduct multi-agency referral training once the programme had already been set up in a centre, to enable referrers to be able to signpost families in the immediate future.</p> <p data-bbox="815 1032 1353 1140">It was critical to emphasise goals and opportunities for mutual benefit and outcomes at an early stage.</p> <p data-bbox="815 1184 1417 1547">We encouraged ongoing engagement between referral partners and the centre delivering the programme, particularly health partners. This often became an opportunity to engage with teams or services that had not always worked with centres in the past. Areas which provided regular feedback to referrers of the progress of their families, encouraged repeat referrals.</p> <p data-bbox="815 1592 1374 1729">Programme information ensured opportunities for referrals within existing systems, such as the 2 year review, are embedded in delivery.</p>

## Barriers / Challenge

In some areas, volunteer recruitment and clearance was time consuming and caused delays in delivery.

This was worsened in areas where children's centres had very little experience of working with volunteers and were anxious about managing them. Some local authority policies required advanced level training courses be completed before volunteers could start the programme. This could deter volunteers and was extra administration for children centre staff.

## Mitigation / solutions

This took patience, support and commitment on behalf of the local authority partners. Approaches to volunteer recruitment varied widely and included:

- a) recruiting from pools of existing children's centre, school and nursery volunteers
- b) engaging local students in childcare courses recruiting from wider volunteer networks via the local authority (and in at least one case, the local authority's own staff volunteering scheme) or
- c) third sector children's centre provider such as 4Children or local church groups
- d) promoting the programme with local community groups and organisations and from the immediate local community
- e) advertising within schools, family information services, organisations representing targeted communities and across local authorities
- f) the most successful areas used a combination of these strategies, especially

Regular attendance or retention of families could be an issue in some areas, particularly where families with complex needs were less familiar with the setting or unknown to staff.

Gaining referrals from professionals with trusted relationships with families and involving them in initial introductions to the setting, or reminders, helped to maintain attendance.

The relationship between the volunteer and the family was a key factor to encourage informal learning and engagement of the family.

Careful matching of families to volunteers, and recruiting a mix of families to the session to enable positive group dynamics, with some families with more stable lifestyles, could help to provide consistent attendance and model interaction for families with complex needs.

## Costs

DfE funded the two year pilot work with a grant of £940,000. This included design, delivery and evaluation and grants to local partners to assist coordination and reporting.

Going forward, the programme is available in 2015 at a cost of £3,500 for up to 4 settings and 100 families (with resources for 50 volunteers). Within that cost, the National Literacy Trust provides two days training, including volunteer training decks, and all programme resources for delivery. The price also includes one year's membership of the National Literacy Trust's Network – an online improvement network for early years settings and schools with tools, advice and support and access to discounted book purchase. National Literacy Trust staff provide desk support during implementation and evaluation tools to support tracking and impact.

## Potential savings

The evaluation has identified an impact on children's language and communication and an improvement in home learning environments. We therefore expect savings to be achieved in schools as a child that has completed Early Words Together will be more school ready around communication and language and more able to concentrate.

The programme is also beneficial as a parent engagement programme by engaging parents in school activity in a non-threatening way. It allows teachers to develop a rapport with families and engage them in their child's learning.

More generally, the programme has been seen as a very helpful addition for children's centres as it supports a centre to change the way it works by directly addressing Ofsted requirements:

- Helps parents and carers to develop and extend their parenting skills – Early Words Together supports parents to become interested in and know how to effectively encourage and stimulate their child's learning and development
- Provides a structured scheme for parental engagement with children's centres, adult learning, volunteer opportunities and preparation for work
- Addressing early help – this programme encourages co-working with other agencies to identify families who would most benefit from early help. It also supports children's centres in providing targeted support
- Supporting school readiness – this programme directly supports a child's early communication, language and literacy, and through improved home learning may increase a child's attainment in the long-term

## Must dos

- Siting the programme within education or children's services with strong management links to early years settings and schools was a critical factor to engage children's centres and facilitate regular delivery within the core programme
- Establishing close links with adult education, employability teams and / or family learning was helpful to increase both volunteer and family recruitment and enable capacity building
- Commissioning or senior management support to raise the priority of the programme to schools, children's services and multi-agency partners, and champion it as a key action within literacy / school readiness / parental engagement strategies.

## **C4EO Golden Threads**

### **Giving children the best start in life**

Giving children the best start in life is fundamental to the Early Words Together programme which is based on research evidence that identified the most effective home learning activities in which parents could support young children's learning. These activities promote **language for life** as they specifically focus on the development of young children's communication, language and literacy development.

### **Engaging parents**

Engaging parents as their child's first educators ensures that they actively support their children's learning in their early years and they are ready for school. Giving them information about activities with which families can engage and having a volunteer to provide a model of speaking and listening is based on the notion that **knowledge is power** and that informed parents are most likely to put their learning into practice.

The programme materials are designed to be **family friendly** in order that language and literacy activities are seen to be integrated into everyday activities of daily life. They are accessible to volunteers and are focused on encouraging children's love of books, establishing early literacy behaviours and improving parental confidence in supporting their children's reading and language development.

### **6.3 Parent Champions: A peer to peer delivery model that informs and engages disadvantaged families who have not previously engaged with early education services**

#### **The context and rationale**

There are two key impacts from the Parent Champion Model;

1. The impact on Parents/families and children from the Parent Champion intervention
2. The impact on the Parent Champion volunteers' journey and development

#### **The Parent Champion Background**

Parent Champions originated as a small-scale pilot scheme following research conducted by Daycare Trust between 2004 and 2007, which found that despite advances in childcare provision in the UK in that period, disadvantaged groups still remained less likely to take up childcare. The Daycare Trust (which merged with the Family and Parenting Institute in 2013 to become Family and Childcare Trust) was commissioned by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families to coordinate six-month Parent Champion childcare pilot schemes in Camden, Newham and Tower Hamlets. The project provided an opportunity to test a variety of methods of reaching and engaging with parents and also consider the effectiveness of Parent Champions. The outcomes of these trials were very successful and the DFE continued to support the development of Parent Champions.

#### **Knowledge Base**

The Parent Champion model has been established within the context of developments in Government policy to improve the access of two year olds to high quality early education. Recent research suggests a strong case for investing in the foundation years (pregnancy to age 5) Graham Allen's (MP) Early Intervention Next Steps points to the way that children's neurological pathways develop before the age of 3 and the benefits of early support and intervention to ensure all children develop the social and emotional foundations they need. In his report of the Independent Review of Poverty and Life Chances, the Rt Hon Frank Field MP also stressed the critical importance of the foundation years upon disadvantaged children's life chances.

40% of 2-year-olds are now entitled to 15 hours a week of free early education. Local authorities have a duty to secure these places for income disadvantaged two-year-olds, as well as those who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), or whom the local authority looks after. This approach is central to the Government's ambition to narrow the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, with strong evidence of the long-term benefits of high quality early education.

*"The Westminster Parent Champions project has been instrumental in providing the platform for engaging with Arabic speaking parents to highlight the take up of formal childcare and early learning services as well as awareness of the Family Information Service".*

(Westminster Family Information service Parent Champion Tool Kit page 15)

With the continued support and funding from the DFE the Family and Childcare Trust have supported successive stages of development and evaluation which have included six pathfinder projects, including the Liverpool Project in 2011/12, the launch of the Parent Champions National Network in 2012 with practical tools, resources and training provided to schemes to support implementation and learning across the Network – providing a wealth of experience to draw on.

The Family and Childcare Trust supports to date 134 members in the network ranging

from inquiry, development and active – there are 37 schemes active presently run by or commissioned by local authorities and some independent/voluntary sector schemes. The Family and Childcare Trust provide a number of resources to help set up Parent Champion Schemes.

### **The Parent Champion National Network Model**

Parent Champions should be delivered by parents, ideally those who reflect the communities they are trying to reach, with the aim of increasing take up of early years services and the active engagement of parents in the education of their young children.

They are parents who have had positive experiences of using childcare and/or supporting their child's early learning, who act as advocates and peer advisors to other parents in the community.

Being local parents, they can chat informally, drawing on their own positive experiences. In this way, they can build parents' confidence and overcome language, cultural and other barriers to service use.

*" To see new faces coming through the doors of the Children's Centres and getting praise from the local groups to say that they are over-run with new people and to know that it's our doing makes you feel so proud to be part of a brilliant team"*

(Parent Champions quote Coram Trust Parent Champion Evaluation report, March 2014)

The Parent Champion's role is one of peer outreach workers engaging with parents in the community to offer information and support;

- Help parents to understand the benefits of quality childcare and early learning
- Encourage parents to participate in early learning activities with their children inside and outside the home
- Help parents to find out about and take up formal childcare places for their children
- Encourage parents to participate in local childcare and early learning services e.g volunteer to help out at activities

### **The Parent Champion Plus Model (2013-15)**

This is a project led by the Family and Childcare Trust in partnership with Action for Children and funded by the DFE and is being independently evaluated by Coram Trust.

The Parent Champion Plus differs from the Parent Champion Network in the following ways;

- The model is fully funded by the DFE including the employment of Parent Champion Coordinators who are managed and supervised by Children Centre Managers/ Coordinators
- The structure of the model is clearly defined with clear targets
- It is being independently evaluated by Coram Trust

## The Aim

To improve access to early education and childcare services for non-engaged disadvantaged families by developing and delivering 'Parent Champions Plus': a new approach embedding delivery of the evidenced Parent Champions model through Action for Children Children's Centres and diversifying the model to target particular support needs.

## Objectives: 2013-15

- Diversify and enrich the Parent Champion model to focus on specific support needs, for example promoting the new two year old entitlement.
- Pilot Parent Champions Plus delivery through 36 Parent Champion Plus volunteers across 37 Action for Children children's centres (Parent Champion's can cover more than 1 centre) across 4 local authorities in year one and repeated in year two.
- Encourage wider participation of non-engaged parents in children's centres.

Fulfilling these objectives will lead to improved outcomes for children; disadvantaged children will benefit particularly from high quality pre-school provision and early childhood interventions will boost children's confidence and social skills, which provides a better foundation for success at school.

(Referenced in the Liverpool Parent Champion Report 2012)

A parent case study from the Liverpool Parent Champion Project (page 17) evidences the impact on parents in their own words;

*"the children now have nursery places and I thought the Parent Champions were very, very helpful...My little girl's speech is much loads better. She had problems with her speech but she is coming on a treat. It is much better"*

In addition to this, because she now goes to a mother and toddler group, as recommended by the Parent Champion she has improved her own quality of life by making friends;

*"I go to mother and toddler groups and I've made loads of new friends in the groups and my life has changed considerably"*

The focus of the program remains the same as the Parent Champion Network model, Parent Champions reaching out into their communities to engage with parents who are not engaging with early years services

The Parent Champions Volunteers

What has clearly been identified with this particular volunteering approach is the positive impact on the Parent Champions.

In the 'Parent Champion Tool Kit' (Family and Childcare Trust Page 15) the benefits of volunteering for parents are highlighted;

- A route to employment or a chance to try something new, which may lead to a career change
- An opportunity to gain new skills and knowledge through training
- A way of getting to know and support the local community
- A way to gain confidence and self esteem
- A chance to socialise and meet new people

- An opportunity to give something back to an organisation or community that has had a positive impact on a person or their family
- A way of supporting their children

The Liverpool Project (Evaluation report 2012) had a clear vision of the outcomes they wanted to achieve, these included, development of transferable skill; increased confidence, communication and aspiration, so improving their job readiness.

The 6 Parent Champions had all been unemployed, some since leaving school, had little or no experience of skilled employment and few formal qualifications, however five out of the six obtained paid skilled work and there had been significant improvements in confidence, work readiness, self esteem and the acquisition of important skills to enhance their career prospects.

The Action for Children Parent Champion Plus pilot is also finding a similar impact and in the Coram Evaluation Report 2014 feedback from volunteers indicated in many cases the role had been a challenging experience from which they had gained personal skills. Strong gains in self-esteem and confidence were commonly reported. Volunteers spoke of going into the role unconfident in their abilities and nervous about speaking in public. They had thrived in the responsibility of working as a Parent Champion and felt they made a positive contribution to the community in their work.

A quote from an Action for Children Parent Champion highlights their confidence;

*"It is nice knowing that after speaking to a person/family we have made a difference to them by helping or just chatting and I find now they come back for more advice. I attended a volunteer event at the local pastoral centre but they were looking for people to volunteer and unfortunately I just didn't have the time to give. But they have asked me to go back and talk about my volunteering at some point.*

*I now volunteer at my local children's centre two days a week in the reception, which I love and I can also do some Parent Champion work here. I have been lucky enough to sign up for a NVQ in Business and even luckier that I'm getting support with my childcare. It is a nice feeling to be SHARON and not just MUM.*

(Family and Childcare Trust 'Parent Champion Case Studies Booklet')

## **The Practice**

There are two sets of outcomes /impacts being measured in the Coram Trust Evaluation:

1. Parents/families and children from the Parent Champion intervention
2. Parent Champion volunteers journey and development

The Family and Childcare Trust with its partners Action for Children and Coram Trust have been following the journeys of Parent Champions with interviews, case studies and surveys of their experiences and in December 2014 created a volunteer form which explores why Parent Champions wanted to become volunteers and then does a review/follow up on how being a Parent Champion has impacted on them e.g. confidence levels; skill; knowledge etc.

The following description not only highlights the process but also the learning, development and support of the volunteers.

## Parent Champion Model

The Parent Champions model uses the knowledge that parents trust other parents for information about childcare, to reach out to those who do not access services and to ensure that all those who need it receive information.

The model is particularly useful for targeting communities in which participation in children's early learning and the use of childcare is not the norm, to introduce the concept of childcare and early learning and how it can benefit children and families to parents in a non-intrusive way. A comment from a parent in the Coram Trust survey states;

*“ to help other parents in the community understand what the children's centre provides. To share experiences I have had on the course and activities they provide and how they have positively impacted my family”*

(Parent Champion)

## Parent Champions National Network

The Family and Childcare Trust provide a comprehensive web site, Parent Champion Tool kit and other excellent resources and training to support the implementation and development of a Parent Champion scheme; A comment from a Parent Champion coordinator in Liverpool states;

*“We have worked with you since 2011 and the programme has worked extremely well in Liverpool. Hundreds of families have received and acted on information about childcare and children's centre activities from the Parent Champion teams”.*

(Liverpool Parent Champion Report 2012)

## Parent Champion Scheme Structure

1. Membership of the Family and Childcare Trust 'Parent Champion' web site
2. Recruitment of Parent Champion Coordinator 19 hours per week  
(This can be done by existing roles e.g. children centre worker)
3. Recruitment of a minimum of 6 Parent Champion volunteers working 5 hours per week (where possible) ideally across a cluster of 4 to 8 children centres or other organisational bases
4. Training and development for Parent Champion volunteers
5. Support Package for Parent Champions
6. How to make Referrals
7. Parent Champions data monitoring forms (Coram Trust Evaluation)
8. Progression and development of the Parent Champions journey

### 1. Membership of the Parent Champions National Network

Any one can register an interest with the Family and Childcare Trust to become part of the Parent Champions National Network. They will be given a login for the Parent Champion member's area where they can download all the information and resources they need to develop a scheme of their own. Presently this is funded by the DFE, however in the future there may be a fee to become a member and additional fees for consultancy advice and training if required.

## **2. Parent Champion Coordinator role and responsibilities**

The role of the Parent Champion Coordinator is to manage the development of the scheme and recruit, train, support and supervise the Parent Champion Volunteers, this role can be done by one person either employed specifically for the role or existing workers can be identified but it must be made clear that the time required is protected for these workers to succeed.

**3. Recruitment** of Parent Champion volunteers is a key component of this model. We recommend a minimum of 6 volunteers as a start-up as there can be a number of reasons within this cohort group that a high level of drop out can occur. E.g. volunteers own personal life; going into training; employment etc.

A regular recruitment campaign will ensure capacity of the scheme, in the Action for Children 'Oldham Scheme' they put a high profile local media campaign together using a DVD which the volunteers made which was shown in children's centres and health centres. They contacted their local radio and newspaper for interviews and also ran regular events in the market square. They recruited 16 volunteers.

However there are also challenges in recruiting volunteers and in our survey for the Coram Evaluation 50% of respondents felt that the recruitment was good; 31% felt it was satisfactory; and 19% said it was poor. The work required to recruit and retain volunteers should not be underestimated.

### **Interviews and Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS)**

The Family and Childcare Trust has a very good Parent Champion Tool Kit for start-up of a project and this gives an outline for letters interviews etc. It is important to have a role and responsibilities job outline ready for interviewing the prospective volunteers, this formalises the process allowing the volunteer to see their roles and responsibilities and also the coordinator to explore with the volunteer their skills, knowledge and expectations of the role.

Parent Champions generally work directly with parents and are not left alone with children. VBS checks should be completed if the Parent Champions work with children directly; however, the scheme needs to follow their own organisation's policies and procedures.

## **4. Training and Development**

There are two aspects to the start-up training for Parent Champions;

- The Family and Childcare Trust Parent Champion Training Package
- The organisations own policies and procedures, including; Safe Guarding; Health and Safety; Lone Working; Fire Safety

The Family and Childcare Trust have delivered the training through specialist consultants over a full day or two short days. The training is interactive and comprises of the following;

Day 1	Day 2
Aims and Objectives What is a Parent Champion Services the Parent Champions will need to link with Referring parents to services Introduction to Childcare Understanding Boundaries Health and Safety – good working practice Action Research	What is engagement Role Play on how to engage parents Capturing and monitoring information Questioning Techniques Communication skills Self fulfilling prophesy Next Steps

Depending on the targets set for the Parent Champions and their own personal journeys additional training maybe required.

### 5. Support Package for Parent Champions

The reasons that people give for volunteering and participating in local services, include:

- A route to employment, or a chance to try something new, which may lead to a career change.
- An opportunity to gain new skills and knowledge through training.
- A way of getting to know and support their local community.
- A way to gain confidence and self-esteem.
- A chance to socialise and meet new people.
- Opportunities to give something back to an organisation or community that has had a positive impact on a person or their family's life.
- A way of supporting the development of their children.
- (Family and Childcare Trust Parent Champion Tool kit)

Parent Champions require a robust support package, the organisation will have expectation of them but they should also have expectations of how they will be supported by their organisation, there should be an identified worker who will be given the time and skills to offer the following;

- Contact details of their supervisor and other parent champions
- Weekly phone contact
- A monthly face to face meeting with their supervisor
- A monthly peer group meeting with other Parent Champions to give support, share learning experiences and planning next steps
- Expenses (travel and phone call)
- Support to access training opportunities for their own development and progression

## **6. How Parent Champions Make Referrals**

Communication and listening to the parents to identify what they most need is essential if the referral is to be taken up. There is no point forcing information on a parent if they are not ready to hear it. Parent Champions need to be knowledgeable about their local services to enable them to sign post and refer parents on.

### **Referral routes**

There are two ways of a Parent Champion making a referral;

- 1) Parent Champion gives contact information to the parent and they contact FIS/ Children's Centres directly to ask for information
- 2) They take the parents contact details and they contact FIS/Children centres on behalf of the parents and pass the information on

Some parents need further support to access the service/activity and Parent Champions can offer support and introduce them to the service/activity.

Other agencies can also refer parents to the Parent Champion which enables the Parent Champions to reach some of the most vulnerable families. E.g. Health Visitors

## **7. Parent Champions data monitoring forms (Coram Trust Evaluation)**

Parent Champions have responsibility to fill in the monitoring forms, which enables the scheme to measure the impact they are having. Where possible the Parent Champion needs to ask for contact details of the parent then they can do a 4 week follow up to see how the parent got on with their referral and also to see if they need anything else. If parents do not want to give their details then the first part of the monitoring form is filled in and submitted online to snap survey.

## FORMS

- **Parent data collection form** - for recording data from one-to-one chats with parents.
- **Group outreach monitoring form** - for recording summary information from group events.
- **Parent Champions: Volunteer survey (V1: Before volunteering)** - for volunteers to fill in when they first start volunteering.
- **Parent Champions: Volunteer survey (V2: End of volunteering/6 months review)** - for volunteers to fill in when they finish volunteering, or after six months if they are continuing to volunteer.

## GUIDANCE

- **Parent Champions Data Collection guidance - Parent data** - the guidance for collecting data on parents talked to, during both one-to-one chats and talks to groups.
- **Parent Champions Data Collection guidance - Volunteer data** - the guidance for collecting data from Parent Champion volunteers on their volunteer journey.
- **Parent Champions data reporting guidance** - the guidance for the SnapSurveys data entry of the four forms above, covering both the data on parents talked to, and on the volunteer journey.

## Others Agencies Involved

Partnership working is a vital part of this package to support the right information and services/ activities to meet need. It is important that the Parent Champions have the most up to date and accurate information so they do not let parents down but also partner organisations understand what Parent Champions do and use them effectively to refer parents/families and children who are most vulnerable.

- Family Information Service
- Children's Centres
- Health Centres
- Health Visitors
- Libraries
- Parent and Toddler Groups
- Schools
- Other early years local services
- Adult Education

## 7. Progression and development of the Parent Champions Journey

It is now recognised that Parent Champions have their own journeys and have found volunteering very beneficial to their own development. Collecting case studies directly from Parent Champions has enable their journey to be evidenced in their own words The Parent Champions Stories can be found on the link below and the booklet is attached to this submission.

A link to what parent champions have to say

<http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/hear-from-parent-champions>

## Parent Champions Conference

The annual conference gives Parent Champion coordinators and volunteers time to celebrate and share their learning and experiences across the network particularly looking at innovation and diversity.

## **Parent Champion 'Chatter'**

This is a magazine produced by the Family and Childcare Trust to share up to date news and information across the Parent Champion Network and to help celebrate success by sharing stories.

## **Evidence and evaluation**

The Parent Champions National Network and Action for Children Parent Champion Plus has been extensively reviewed and monitored and the model has been validated through its repeated use across 37 local authorities across England and 12 Pilot areas within Action for Children.

**The Coram Trust independent** evaluation is based upon collecting information through;

**Snap Survey** a web based Monitoring system which all Parent Champion members can access and input their data. Each scheme is able to download their own reports and on a national level analysis can take place across all schemes.

**On site interviews** with selected schemes and survey questionnaires to all schemes, which include gathering the views and experiences of Parent Champion Coordinators; Parent Champion Volunteers and Parents to explore the qualitative impact of the model.

### **1. The impact on Parents/families and children from the Parent Champion intervention**

The Coram Trust Parent Evaluation 2014 showed that within this trusting environment created by Parent Champions parents were able to listen to advice and take on new ideas and suggestions, in a way that may not have occurred had the parents received the same information through other channels;

- In 57% of cases recommendations made by Parent Champion was used by parents with 43% of referrals leading to regular use of the service or activity recommended.
- 44% of contacts had a broader positive impact on parents, including improved parenting confidence and awareness of local services

The 2014 Report data recorded 144 parents were contacted on a one to one basis with the Parent Champions giving 166 referrals of these.

A notable highlight of the data was the high referrals and take up for the 2 year offer, 23% of Action for Children total referrals and 13% of the national network referrals led to regular use of the offer. Referrals for children centre services/activities were 44% for Action for Children and 31% for the national network.

Using the research highlighted in section one (Graham Allan & Frank Fields Reports) we can safely assume that the increase in attending these early childcare and early intervention services will have a major impact on the children's neurological development, learning and social and emotional health. The Parent Champion intervention has had a very positive effect.

## Impact on Parents

A key indicator of the efficacy of the Parent Champion work was whether the contact with parents led to any action or changed behavior. The 4 week follow up following referral given enabled the parents to be asked what impact the referral had, did they take up the service offered (see above results).

They were also asked if there were any other impacts and 77% stated they were more aware of local services and 9% of parents stated that they were more confident, as this was not a stated objective of the Parent Champions it has highlighted that the impact is broader than just giving information and referrals.

In the Liverpool Parent Champion Project Report a parent talked about the noticeable improvement in her parenting skill;

*"I can now engage more with my daughter and I have a lot more of an understanding of what her needs are...before the positive parenting she was getting a bit unruly because I didn't know how to deal with her bad behavior...now we can have a good day and I am not shouting at her"*

## 2. The impact on the Parent Champion volunteers' journey and development

The Coram Trust Evaluation report data records a total of 45 volunteers were trained by Family and Childcare Trust in the Action for Children Pilot sites and 100 volunteers across the Parent Champion Network Schemes.

In the Action for Children Pilot of the 45 volunteers trained 36 became active Parent Champion, this represents 80% retention which compares favourably to other volunteer led services.

Volunteers reported that working as a Parent Champion had been a challenging but very rewarding experience leading to significant gains in personal development and soft skills:

- Improvement in self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Improvement in communication skills and public-speaking ability.
- Gains in administration skills helping improved employability.
- Experience led to gaining employment in children's services sector.
- Feelings of personal efficacy in helping to improve lives of parents and contributing to community.

One Parent Champion commented;

*"it is great to feel you have helped someone by signposting them somewhere to help with their problems"*

The Parent Champions were very positive about their experience of being a parent Champion, of the 36 Parent Champion 42% were very satisfied and 47% satisfied. 89% of Parent Champions said they would recommend others becoming Parent Champions.

The Liverpool Parent Champion Project is closely linked to their Volunteers into Practice (VIP) programme this enable them to measure the journey of the volunteer effectively:

- Five out of the six Parent Champions have obtained paid skilled employment
- Volunteering and training were critical pathways to paid employment, which has improved the financial and emotional wellbeing of the whole family.
- They have been inspired to pursue further educational and training opportunities with one Parent Champion planning to enter Higher Education
- They have become recognised role models in the local communities inspiring other parents to seek volunteering opportunities.

The Coram Trust Parent Champion Evaluation Report (2014) concluded that building on previous Parent Champion work the programme offered further evidence of the effectiveness of the peer to peer based model. In both Action for Children children's centre Parent Champion schemes and the National Net Work schemes Parent Champions proved effective in communicating to parents and encouraging take up of early years services on a regular basis, so improving the life chances of some of the most vulnerable children and families.

### **Sustaining and replicating the practice**

Replication has been proven across 37 local Authority and children centre schemes and in addition the Action for Children pilot.

- Parent Champions is a proven and cost-effective tool for reaching families who have not traditionally accessed childcare and other services for children.

### **Benefits for families**

Running a Parent Champions scheme can:

- raise parents' awareness of local childcare and family services, improving their children's outcomes;
- bring families into children's centres
- allow families to be involved in the development of local services;
- work to support minority groups and their engagement in services;

### **Benefits for volunteers and communities**

- add value to the role of volunteers;
- create a pathway to training and employment;
- increase the quality and capacity of outreach work

### **Benefits for local statutory duties**

- support local authorities to achieve legislative duties, for example, identifying families who are eligible for the two-year-old offer of free childcare, and providing information to the most deprived families, and those with disabled children.
- The scheme is highly popular because parents often consider word-of-mouth as the most trusted source of information

## **Top Tips for Running a Parent Champion Scheme?**

Setting up does not have to be costly or time consuming. Here are some top tips:

- Involve local parents and volunteers in the planning as early as possible
- Match your Parent Champions as closely as possible to the groups or geographical areas you are trying to reach.
- Go step by step — it is better to start with a small number of good Parent Champions, which in turn will bring momentum to your project.
- Be realistic in what you manage.
- Over recruit – due to likely natural dropout
- Reassure local outreach staff that Parent Champions are there to support not to replace them
- Keep careful records to show your impact.
- Provide good support — ensure your volunteers know that they have back up when they need it.
- Help the Parent Champions to support each other
- Celebrate both yours and the Parent Champions achievements
- Inform local organisations and decision makers about what you learn through your Parent Champion experiences

## **Challenges to be Aware of;**

- Recruiting Volunteers – this needs to be done on a rolling programme
- Retaining Volunteers – part of the success is that volunteers move on, accept this and put a rolling programme in place for recruiting – remember over recruit
- Resourcing the scheme – Setting up and running the scheme does not have to cost a lot but you do need to ensure that you have identified structures and responsibilities to support the scheme. The Parent Champion Tool Kit is an excellent resource for this.
- Accessing the most disadvantaged family's need robust partnership work, Parent Champions may need additional training and development to visit people's homes; in Torbay Action for Children Scheme the Parent Champion goes out with the Family Support Worker to visit people homes.

## **Golden Threads – Build on existing local need and priorities**

- Getting the buy-in of local authorities and/or local partners is paramount to good partnership working and the access to the right information for Parent Champions
- Good leadership is essential to support the Parent Champions in their role, they may require more support to raise their confidence and self-esteem – they must be able to go at their own pace and within their own networks
- Set clear targets which meet local need and ensure you can measure the impact of what you do
- Try to embed Parent Champions into your service – do not see them as a separate entity this will make your scheme more sustainable
- Celebrate; have fun; and learn from mistakes
- Remember the Parent Champions journey – what do they want to be, what are their ambitions.

## **The Parent Champion model can be adapted;**

Wandsworth – reaching parents of Disabled Children:

Like many councils, Wandsworth has a Disabled Children's Register, which families of disabled children aged 0-19 can voluntarily join. Members of the register receive regular information about activities and services, and the council and health services have a better understanding of the needs of families to inform service provision.

In 2012 the WAND card was introduced following feedback from members of the DCR- the aim of the card is to reduce the need to give lengthy explanations when seeking assistance

when out and about. The card also gives concessions to families to local attractions and with businesses. All families who join the Disabled children's Register are automatically signed up to the card and issued with their own WAND card to use around town

In order to increase awareness of the Wand Card and the DCR, Parent Champion volunteers were recruited via the DCR newsletter. Nine volunteers underwent Family and Childcare Trust training and began outreach work a few months later. Between them the Parent champions speak a range of languages including: Polish, Cantonese/Mandarin, Twi, Edo, Bengali, Hindi and Urdu.

Through visiting schools, summer fairs, local community events and talking to SENCOs, Parent Champions have increased the members on the DCR by over 140.

The long term vision is for every town centre in the borough of Wandsworth to have a hub of shops and services which are WAND-friendly, thanks to the Parent Champions!

### **Other developments of the model**

Seeing the potential benefits, schemes have themselves wanted to adapt the model, for instance including breast feeding information (Barnsley), oral health and obesity messages (Brent), working with health visitors (Carlisle) and building on parenting classes (Leeds).

### **Innovation hub**

As well as the continued ever-increasing interest in Parent Champions with new enquiries coming in every couple of weeks, schemes have recognised the flexibility and value of the model, and requested help in adapting the model at a local level. The Parent Champions National Network has naturally evolved into a hub for innovation, with a whole range of applications coming from the ground upwards. During the last two years the National Network has expanded and diversified much more than even expected.

### **Costs of running a Parent Champion**

The costs of running a parent Champion scheme can be minimal, however, getting the right sort of leadership and support for the Parent Champions is essential;

- The cost of a Coordinator, support worker level 2 or 3 for 19 hours per week/or
- Build coordination into existing structures, roles as additional responsibilities for workers helping them to develop their skills – there is still a cost to workers time with this approach
- Management time for supporting the coordinator
- Supporting travel costs and expenses for Parent Champion Volunteers (these can be minimal if working in local area)
- Training and resources can be done in house with Family and Childcare Trust support (depending on future funding there may be a charge for this service in the future).

## 7 Other Information and Examples

### 7.1 Parents as REAL Volunteers

**REAL – Raising Early Achievement in Literacy** is an approach developed, by Professor Cathy Nutbrown and Peter Hannon at the University of Sheffield initially for three and four year olds and their families. It encourages participation in, and enjoyment of, the four key aspects of early literacy – books, early writing and mark making, singing songs and rhymes (phonological awareness) and reading and engaging with environmental print. The aim is to enhance young children's progress in early language, literacy, and social development, by building parents' confidence to provide strong early home learning environments, and engage with early years' settings. REAL uses ORIM as its supporting theoretical framework; working with parents to enhance opportunities (O) for literacy; recognition (R) and support of progress; interaction (I) with children through play activity and real experiences; and modelling (M) of literacy behaviours.

From 2019-12 Sheffield LA worked with the University of Sheffield, Oldham LA (who ran a parallel project) and the National Children's Bureau to develop the 'Making it REAL' programme during which families received four home visits and four invitations to four special literacy events. REAL builds on what parents already do at home to help children learn. The friendly, respectful relationships developed between practitioner, parents and children are central. The REAL/ORIM framework provides a theoretical and practice foundation which is interpreted by professional teams to fit local and individual needs. Further information about this project is available at <http://c4eo.org.uk/local-practice/validated-local-practice-examples/making-it-real-raising-early-achievement-in-literacy-%28real%29,-sheffield.aspx#>

Funding for an extension of REAL training and new Local Authority development projects was provided by the Department for Education (2012-15). As a part of this volunteers were included in REAL delivery.

#### Parents as REAL volunteers

The Early Childhood Unit at National Children's Bureau have continued to further develop 'Making it REAL', including creating a 'Making it REAL for Parents' programme.

The Making it REAL for Parents programme helps parents to understand their role in children's early literacy development and to share this with others through volunteering. There are four workshops which involve group learning and activities, including an opportunity to practice and rehearse conversations with parents, in order to build their confidence in sharing REAL with others.

The programme is designed and delivered by National Children's Bureau and endorsed by the National Open College Network. Participants have the opportunity to have their achievements recognised at Entry, Intermediate and Advanced standard. The programme has been successfully piloted in Peterborough and is now being rolled out with other LAs.

## **7.2 Parent volunteers in Charnwood, Leicestershire**

Charnwood contains seven children's centre reach areas and services a 0 – 4 years population of around 9,000 children. In June 2011 the LA commissioned a parent volunteer co-ordinator role to lead a programme to recruit, co-ordinate and support a target of 60 active parent volunteers all drawn from targeted, vulnerable or groups considered to be priority across the different areas. In the definition of what a 'parent' was parents, parents-to-be, grandparents and prospective foster and adoptive parents were all included, as long as the children involved were under the age of five.

The key principles for leadership and co-ordination of the programme were partnership and sharing. Pivotal change was achieved through short and accessible training sessions that helped professionals to become confident and clear about what volunteering was, and how essential it is for opening up parents' opportunities, skills, confidence, self-esteem and motivation.

The recruitment process for parent volunteers was structured around starting a three-part personal development plan, safer recruitment processes including DBS and references and a basic induction session covering general volunteering, safeguarding and professionalism. Once this was completed a placement was identified and the volunteer was allocated an on-site supervisor. If the volunteer didn't have a Maths or English qualification then a referral to adult learning was discussed.

The placement supervisor was a key source of support for the volunteer with the co-ordinating role enabling information to be fed into a central tracking mechanism as well as identifying when Personal Development Plans needed reviewing so volunteers were stretched or supported with new goals if needed.

Routes to employment were promoted and parents leading groups independently were supported by the programme's Facebook presence as a key communication method between the programme and parents. A family network now feeds into the governance and consultation mechanisms of the programme.

Key learning: "We have learned that it takes a lot of time, effort and contact with parent volunteers, so they feel valued and supported. Partnership working is key from start to finish, and taking time to track and report the difference made means everyone is able to identify the achievements made, including Ofsted when they come to make their judgments." Parent volunteer co-ordinator.

## **7.3 Parental engagement: How to make a real difference**

<https://global.oup.com/education/content/primary/key-issues/parental-engagement/?region=uk>

#### **7.4 Literacy Champions programme – National Literacy Trust**

The Literacy Champions programme connects community volunteers with local families with children aged two to five years who would benefit from advice about supporting their children's early literacy development. In 2011-12, the London Literacy Champions project recruited volunteers from communities across London to boost parents' confidence in supporting their children's literacy development.

[http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/literacy\\_champions](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/literacy_champions)

#### **7.5 Community Mothers**

Community Mothers Programme and Family Support Service, Park House, North Circular Road, Dublin 7; Tel: (01) 838 7122, ext. 246/221

The Community Mothers Programme is a Parent Support Programme in which friendly local women known as Community Mothers carry out monthly visits to first and second-time parents in their own homes. These visits are made by appointment and they focus on health care, nutrition and the baby's overall development. The Community Mothers are volunteers and are guided and supported by Family Development Nurses

The Community Mothers Programme recognises parents as being the most important people in their baby's life. The Programme sets out:

- to recognise that, as a parent, you are the expert with your own baby.
- to help you enjoy your baby.
- to boost your self-confidence.
- to help you develop a wide range of parenting skills.
- to exchange ideas and information.
- to provide you with on-going support during the first two years of your baby's life

## 8. References

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[http://archive.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early\\_intervention\\_wave\\_trust\\_international\\_desk\\_study.pdf](http://archive.c4eo.org.uk/themes/earlyintervention/files/early_intervention_wave_trust_international_desk_study.pdf)

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<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/local-practice/validated-local-practice-examples/birth-and-beyond-community-supporters-programme.aspx>

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<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/local-practice/validated-local-practice-examples/parent-champions.aspx>

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(‘Better Together: the power of community conversation’ with George Otero and John West-Burnham. [www.relationalearning.com](http://www.relationalearning.com))

National College for School Leadership: Engaging parents through networks - Effective Partnerships with Parents (EPPa)

<https://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/engaging-parents-through-networks.pdf>

Ofsted: Children's centre self-evaluation form guidance (April 2013)

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/382263/Children\\_27s\\_20centre\\_20self-evaluation\\_20form\\_20guidance\\_20\\_20from\\_20April\\_202013.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/382263/Children_27s_20centre_20self-evaluation_20form_20guidance_20_20from_20April_202013.pdf)

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Ofsted: Good practice examples:

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<http://www.csv.org.uk/volunteering/mentoring-befriending/child-protection>

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Ofsted Ref: 120387, February 2012

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/392043/East\\_20Hastings\\_20Children\\_27s\\_20Centre\\_20-\\_20good\\_20practice\\_20example.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/392043/East_20Hastings_20Children_27s_20Centre_20-_20good_20practice_20example.pdf)

Forest First Children's Centre, Hampshire

[www.google.co.uk/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Ofsted+Ref%3A+120387%2C+February+2012](http://www.google.co.uk/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Ofsted+Ref%3A+120387%2C+February+2012)

<http://www.totton.ac.uk/about-totton-college/facilities-support/forest-first-pre-school.aspx>

## 9. Useful Organisations

### **Volunteering Matters for our Community (2015) (formerly known as CSV – The UK Volunteering and Learning Charity )**

<http://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/>

Resources include case studies and research

### **Volunteering England**

A range of information sheets and good practice bank <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice/information>

### **National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)**

A wide range of information and resources – some free, some require membership, e.g. A quick guide to recruiting volunteers

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/>



