

## **Parent Champions case study – Ashington, Northumberland**

The Parent Champions project in Northumberland is based at Ashington Children's Centre. Ashington is a former mining town situated near the Northumbrian coast. There are high levels of unemployment and significant areas of deprivation. The population is made up of 90 per cent white British families, with a high proportion of teenage or young parents. At the time of the project starting, approximately 200 children were entitled to the free early years places in the local area, but only 50 per cent of these were being taken up. A key reason for this is because it has been difficult to engage with families in the most deprived areas.

The scheme in Ashington is managed and delivered by Action for Children, as part of the partnership with Family and Childcare Trust and Parent Champions. The Children's Centre model is being piloted to try to increase the take up of the free entitlement for two-year-olds and other Early Years Services. The scheme is delivered at Ashington Children Centre with Lindsey, the Community Development Worker, coordinating the seven Parent Champion volunteers.

Action for Children has an established volunteer programme in place. The Parent Champions role was advertised via posters in schools, the local community and the children's centre. The majority of the seven volunteers came through children's centre or nursery, with one coming from a school. As well as the initial training provided by Family and Childcare Trust, Action for Children have their own training programme for volunteers which includes equality and diversity, safeguarding, confidentiality and health and safety. Lindsey, the coordinator, also attended training specifically for coordinators around managing volunteers.

As with many of the Parent Champions across the National Network, the volunteers in Northumberland are women of varying ages. All are white British, as is the demographic of the area. Some of the Parent Champions have young children who are accessing the two-year-old offer.

The Ashington project is well connected to services in the community, including the Family Information Service and Early Years Sustainability Team, as well as the local schools that offer the free two-year-old places. Through their general promotion of family services, Parent Champions also contacted other providers, community organisations, libraries and toddler groups.

The Parent Champions use a number of different methods to reach parents, including attending parent-focused groups at the children's centre, visiting the local playgroups, being present at baby weighing clinics and speaking to families in the waiting room at GP surgeries, as well as setting up stands at local supermarkets to catch passing shoppers. In addition to these ways of reaching parents, Parent Champions also go out on market day in Ashington as this is well attended by many of the local families.

Parent Champion volunteers are supported by Lindsey who arranges regular individual and group supervision meetings, which are held at the children's centre. In these meetings the volunteers discuss how they are finding the role, highlight any issues they have and work through them. They come up with ideas about how to reach parents and how to communicate with them, including where to go and when. As many of the volunteers have young children, they will often attend meetings with them, which works quite well. Lindsey

also feels that the volunteer training provided by Action for Children equipped the Parent Champions for their role and provides ongoing support for them. The volunteers are also very supportive of each other, they share ideas and skills and pair up to help their volunteering. This has helped the project to retain the seven volunteers who were originally recruited.

The project has had a significant impact on the local community and Lindsey feels that community cohesion has been increased. There is more engagement between the children's centre and the wider community. ***"There are a lot of things that go on in Ashington, but these often seem very fragmented. The Parent Champions project has helped to bring this all together and shows the obvious links between services."*** Parent Champions are becoming recognised within the local community as a source of reliable information - health visitors make referrals to them and knowledge about the two-year-old places is becoming far more widespread. ***"They are accepted because they are parents, they share their experiences. New mums feel more confident through their parenting support."***

The project has also had an impact on the Parent Champions, who feel their self-confidence has been boosted. Lindsey has noticed a marked difference in the independence of the volunteers since the start of the project: ***"they are more responsible and organised and also much better at handling the admin tasks"***

The Parent Champions model is well respected within the area, but it is still in its early stages and needs time to develop, but local parents are responding positively to it. Parent Champions can support outreach and engagement with parents, where normally this might not happen. ***"When I started in the role of Community Development Worker I used to get out and about in the community all the time, that doesn't happen that much anymore and the Parent Champions fill this role and help join up the services."***

In planning a Parent Champions scheme, the Ashington project would advise to allow enough time to set things up – ***"Planning, recruitment and marketing, it all takes time, and longer than you think. And then it needs time to be embedded."*** Lindsey also suggested that having a good volunteer programme in place would be beneficial, as it can offer all the support and the training that is needed.

The Ashington project, like many other Parent Champions schemes, took a little while to get off the ground. It was first initiated in July 2014, with training taking place in October and outreach starting in mid-November. The project is due to end in March 2015, but Action for Children hopes to sustain the work beyond that point and have training planned for the next cohort of volunteers. Some of the existing Parent Champions may stay on for the extended project, as they are just feeling as though they are building in confidence and becoming enthusiastic about their role and they do not want to lose this momentum.