

Parent Champions case study – Slough

The Parent Champions project in Slough was first run in 2012/2013 and was managed by the Family Information Service. In January 2015, Slough started a new Parent Champions project with new volunteers and a new focus.

Slough originally decided to implement a Parent Champions scheme as they wanted to gain access to families within specific geographical pockets, where previously they had had little success. The Family Information Service was already undertaking outreach activities, but they felt that they were having some difficulties in communicating with certain groups of parents in these areas. Although the areas that they had identified were urban, with a mix of affluence and disadvantage, there were fewer parent and toddler groups or similar activities on offer where outreach staff would come into contact with parents, so it was felt that there was a section of the community that was missing out on information about local services.

The aim of the project was to inform parents about formal childcare, and particularly the two-year-old offer, and encourage take up of it. The Parent Champions project was to work in conjunction with the multi-agency working group developing the take up of two-year-old funded places, and also look at how outcomes for two-year-olds in general could be improved. Although the intention was to inform parents about childcare, the Parent Champions also regularly responded to requests for information about adult education and schooling.

The project intended to reach all parents, although due to the mix of families from ethnically diverse backgrounds, there was a particular interest in reaching families from the Somali, Pakistani and Polish community, linking with a project run by Reading University around newly arrived families.

By the end of the project an increase in awareness of local services was hoped to be achieved. Parents Champions found that there were parents locally who had no idea about what was on offer at children's centres, with some saying that they had never even heard of them.

The Slough scheme was managed by the Family Information Service and initially it was intended that it would be co-delivered with local children's centres, with them providing venues for the outreach work, for example. However, as the project progressed, it was found that the children's centres were unable to provide resource to support the work and the Family Information Service was solely responsible for delivery.

The project ran for 18 months, although the last 6 months was seen as not as successful as the first year and the feeling was that it should really have stopped after the 12 month point, in order to review and refresh the work. The Parent Champions really enjoyed the social aspect of the role, which was a positive, but in the last six months it was this that was focussed on by volunteers, rather than the outreach activities, with group meetings widely viewed as social gatherings than support mechanisms.

The project was largely funded by a small grant that was obtained from Family and Childcare Trust. Some internal funding was drawn on to meet additional costs, which came from the general team budget, but the scheme was fairly inexpensive to run. The Parent Champions did not really charge for expenses, as they worked in their local area and within their normal daily activities, expenses were not really incurred. Mobile phones were purchased for the volunteers and some childcare costs were covered. Staff time, for the coordination of the project and supervision of volunteers was probably the largest cost. The new project in Slough has just started, with the support of another small grant from Family and Childcare Trust.

The Parent Champion volunteers were recruited through a number of methods, for example, through job listings added to the Slough borough recruitment website, flyers sent to local children's centres and adverts included in the local newspaper. Two of the Parent Champions were recruited through the children's centres. Recruitment of the new Parent Champions was different, with local authority rules changing, the volunteers came through the central Volunteer Centre, that targeted parents who they were familiar with who they felt would be suitable for the role.

The original project in Slough attracted ten Parent Champions at the outset, although the numbers reduced fairly quickly by half to the five Parent Champions who volunteered for the duration of the scheme.

Four volunteers have been recruited for the new scheme, of which one is working. They do not plan to recruit above the four, as this feels like a manageable amount of volunteers to work with. One of the new Parent Champions is currently pregnant and it is still to be determined whether they will take a break from volunteering and return once the baby is older, which could potentially add an interesting dimension to the work, or whether they are replaced completely.

The Parent Champions attended the initial training provided by Family and Childcare Trust at the start of the project. They were also given the opportunity to attend a range of other training provided by the local authority. As a result, the volunteers were able to be trained in areas such as disability, working with two-year-olds, domestic abuse, safeguarding, first aid,

child protection and getting back into work. The volunteers were very training focussed and welcomed the opportunity to be able to attend all of the training open to local authority staff. The Parent Champions coordinator did not have previous experience of managing volunteers, so attended relevant training provided by the Slough Voluntary Service.

All of the Slough volunteers were women and were representative of the target parents they were trying to reach. The women were more mature and were from mainly Muslim backgrounds, with one from a Polish background, but who married into a Muslim family and converted to Islam. In the new Slough project there are four volunteers, who come from a range of backgrounds both in ethnicity and age and include a young mother who had her first child as a teenager. They are all very confident already and keen to go into their community to speak to other parents.

As the project was managed by the Family Information Service, based at the local authority, they were well placed to access and link with other related family services. The Slough project linked with local voluntary organisations and other Family Information Services, as well as education, health, domestic abuse and children's services.

The Parent Champions communicated with other parents in a variety of ways. Generally the volunteers preferred to work in pairs, for safety reasons, but also to build their confidence and for social interaction with their peers. The one exception to this was the volunteer from a Polish background, who chose to work on her own and visited parks in order to meet other parents, as this is where she explained most Polish parents could be found. Parents Champions in Slough began by shadowing outreach staff in their activities, but also met parents at parent and toddler groups, in children's centres, worked with local schools and attended parents' evenings, visited libraries and supermarkets.

The Parent Champions were also able to attend locations that outreach staff had previously had little success in accessing. This was as a result of the fact that the volunteers were representative of the communities they were engaging with. For example, Parent Champions attended an Asian women's group at a local mosque, organised by the Pakistani Welfare Association. Parents reported that they felt more comfortable speaking to other parents with the same cultural background as themselves.

The original Parent Champions project had a significant impact on community cohesion. Although they were less successful in recording impact in terms of take up of services in Slough, the change that the project made to the volunteers themselves and to the recognition of the parent-to-parent support model in building trust amongst parents, was invaluable. Through the project, Parent Champions were able to support less confident parents to access services and as a result Parent Champions became recognised as trusted and valued

individuals in the community. The perceived raised profile of Parent Champions project in Slough has supported the current continuation of the work.

The Parent Champions project has had a significant impact on its volunteers. Building confidence was seen as one of the most valued benefits of volunteering for the project. Many of the Parent Champions had low levels of confidence before becoming a Parent Champion. Through their role of communicating with others in their community and being viewed as a respected and trusted source of information by parents, the volunteers felt their confidence grow and were able to apply this to other aspects of their lives. After the project ended, one of the Parent Champions went on to begin teacher training and another gained employment in adult learning, a subject that they had fielded numerous enquiries about from parents. The Parent Champions also found the travel and speaking opportunities, offered to them by Family and Childcare Trust through inviting them to speak at national events, hugely beneficial. It was the first time that they had spoken in front of large groups of people and the reception they received immeasurably boosted their self-esteem.

The Parent Champions model is well respected within the Slough borough. The project coordinator needed to seek approval for the continuation of the scheme and this was readily given. When the Parent Champions project first began, the Family Information Service was the only part of the local authority using volunteers in their work. It is now seen as a recognised beneficial model of working and volunteers are used widely throughout the borough's work.

'We would absolutely recommend this way of working to others. It is unique – parents employed to talk to other parents.'

Having already run a Parent Champions scheme and recently re-starting the work in Slough, they feel well placed to offer some guidance to others thinking about using Parent Champions. When thinking of setting up a scheme, Slough would urge you to:

- Commit to a specific period of time and keep to it.
- Have a break - if your project is to continue after the allotted time make a new agreement and recruit new volunteers, or retrain existing ones in order to maintain enthusiasm in the work.
- Be firm and clear about monitoring from the outset and keep it as simple as possible for volunteers.
- Allow yourself plenty of time to plan your project, especially when you need to go through rounds of internal decision making.

- Ensure you have or get good experience of managing volunteers.

The new Parent Champions scheme in Slough is operating with four female volunteers. It will run for a year and is being managed again by the Family Information Service there. It will work in the same way as the previous project, but this time linking with health services.

The project will again focus on the free places for two-year-olds, but will also look at encouraging use of health visitors and parents attending the two-year-old checks. Parent Champions will also promote: formal childcare, especially childminders; financial support available for childcare, including three and four-year-old funding; and childcare for disabled children.