

Parent Champions in action

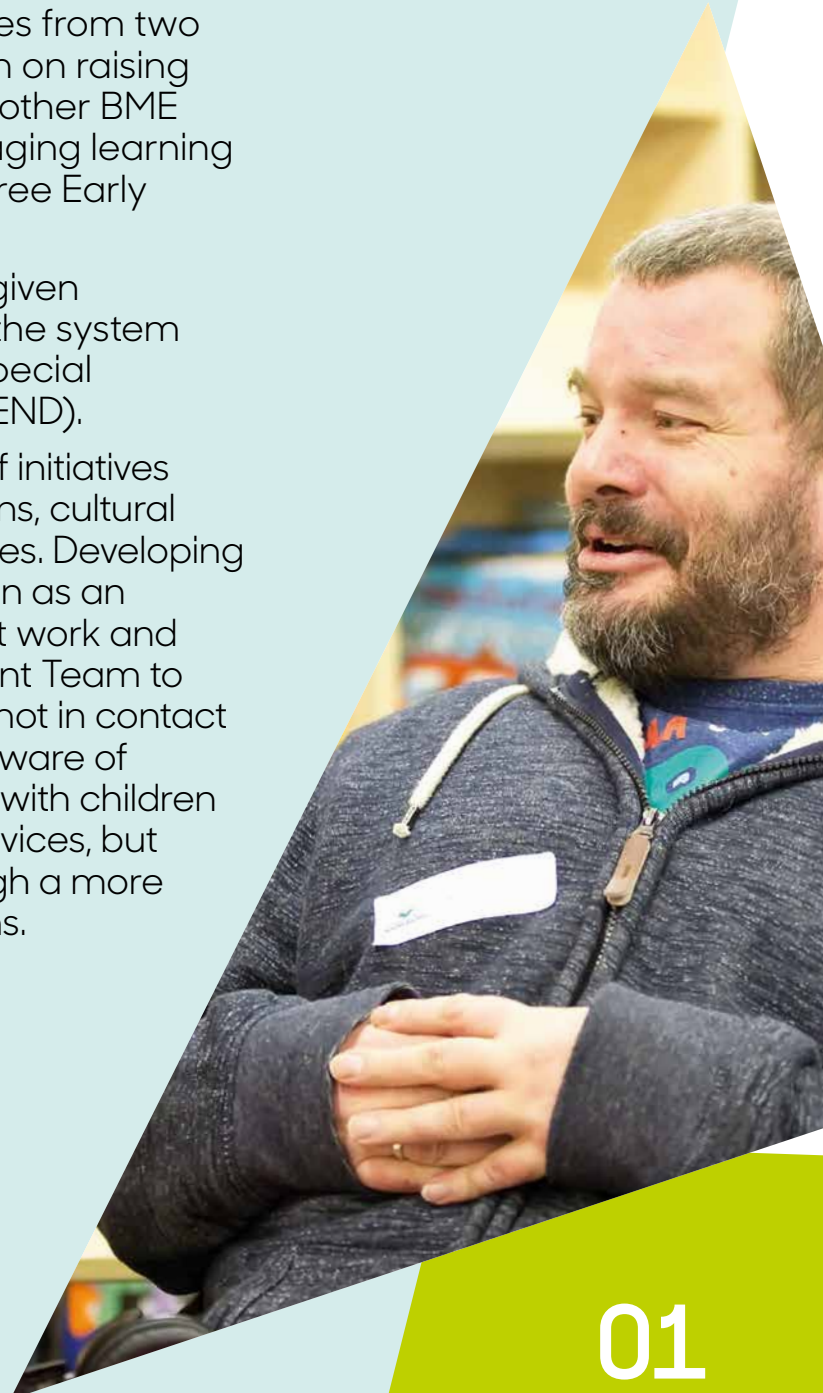
Sheffield case study

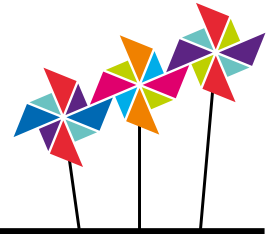
Working with schools to reach BME families

Parent Champions in Sheffield are coordinated by the local authority's Parental Engagement Team and currently deliver outreach activities from two schools in the city. The focus has been on raising awareness among Roma Slovak and other BME families of services available, encouraging learning in the home and information on the Free Early Learning entitlement.

Advice and information is also being given about the Government's changes to the system for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The team is involved in a wide range of initiatives to reach families, including consultations, cultural diversity events and information services. Developing a Parent Champions scheme was seen as an extension to the ongoing engagement work and would enable the Parental Engagement Team to reach parents and families who were not in contact with services. In particular they were aware of different BME communities and those with children with SEND who would benefit from services, but who would need to be reached through a more localised approach to communications.





Recruitment, and training

After gathering community insight, the team narrowed their focus to two areas of the city, which have very mixed communities and a large proportion of new arrivals. Project Manager Noreen Gallagher and Project Coordinator Laurie Haynes approached schools and met with the Headteachers to discuss whether they would be interested in working with them to develop a Parent Champions project.

The schools, Owler Brook and Whiteways, both already held regular coffee mornings for parents that were popular and well attended. The Parental Engagement Team used these coffee mornings as an opportunity to introduce the idea of Parent Champions and recruit parent volunteers.

The Headteacher of Owler Brook assigned a Slovakian speaking Teaching Assistant, who already worked closely with Roma families, to assist the Parental Engagement Team with the cascading of information to families with limited English. This Teaching Assistant identified three Roma parents who were interested in hearing more about becoming a Parent Champion. The standard recruitment process was tailored to suit the language level of the parents, following which the parents were successfully recruited to the scheme. The school now has these three Roma Slovak volunteers supported by James (a parent who coordinates the PTA and is very involved in other community projects) in the role of Parent Champion.

At Whiteways, the Headteacher assigned the school's part-time Family Development Worker, Usha, to work in conjunction with parents and the Parental Engagement Team. Usha is multilingual with her first language being Gujarati. She also speaks Swahili, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and English, which aids her role at Whiteways and her work as an Adult Learning Coordinator at the Yemeni Community Association. Usha has enabled the Parental Engagement Team to make valuable links with the Yemeni Community Association, as well as the school. Usha identified Shahida, a midday supervisor at Whiteways for a potential Parent Champion role, which she is now undertaking. Shahida also has a child at Owler Brook school and is involved in the PTA there. This has been beneficial in terms of creating links between the two schools, as well as with the Parental Engagement Team.

As well as the initial training delivered by Family and Childcare Trust, the Parent Champions also received training in how Multi-Agency Support Teams operate, domestic abuse awareness and multi-cultural diversity.





Project impact

Parent Champions in Sheffield have reached at least 1000 families over 6 months. Primary activities have been signposting to services, and passing on information about the SEND reforms, the new assessment process and where to go to access the city's Local Offer.

In addition to passing on information about services and childcare, the Parent Champions support families in filling out forms, accessing ESOL classes and adult learning, as well as engaging with local community organisations.

They have also been able to encourage parents to sign up to The Parents' Assembly network which, through its weekly newsletter, provides information on family activities, community services and consultations.

Parent Champions have reported increased feelings of confidence, of being recognised within the schools as people to go to for information and for helping to break down barriers to families accessing support.

As several of the Parent Champions are actively involved in a diverse range of community groups, strong links have been made with grass roots organisations, such as the Yemeni Association, which many families are linked to.

The project has also had additional impact across the wider authority, with other council departments recognising the scheme as an effective mechanism for consulting parents.

During a recent consultation on "The Child and Household Poverty Strategy" development, Parent Champions helped the Parental Engagement Team to facilitate discussions with non-English speaking parents from the two schools involved in the scheme. These parents may not otherwise have had the opportunity to contribute to such consultations.

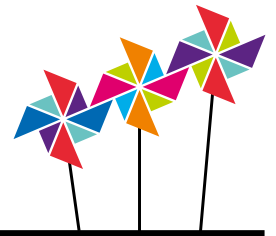
Sustainability

The model developed in Sheffield is cost-effective and highly sustainable. Initial relationships had to be developed with schools and children's centres, but in doing this the Parental Engagement Team have been able to make the most of existing communications' structures and make use of resources to their best advantage. By using existing resources effectively the scheme has been low cost. Schools have been given a small amount of money to support their activities; community organisations have offered training rooms at very low cost as well as expertise on community issues to develop further training opportunities.

As both schools already held coffee mornings for parents, the team have been able to join these where they have a captive audience. With a new influx of parents each academic year, the flow of potential volunteers is continuous. It is also a respected and valued parental engagement activity run by the schools, so barriers often encountered in outreach are overcome.

By enlisting a member of support staff in each school - Teaching Assistant and Family Development Worker - an effective flow of communications to parents, staff, and the wider community has been established. As both the Teaching Assistant and Family Development Worker are bilingual/multilingual they have been able to translate key information into Slovakian and other languages, including monitoring forms that enable the Project Coordinator to capture the scheme's activities and performance.





The future

The Parental Engagement Team will be conducting a full evaluation of the success of the scheme. More schools are already interested in being part of the next stage of the project and links have already been established with a faith school within the city. New Parent Champions have been recruited. Some have already undertaken their induction training while they were with Action for Children. Further training is also being offered to existing volunteers, including the opportunity of an 'exchange programme', where they can attend a parents' session or activity at a school in a different district.

The invaluable insight Parent Champions have given the Parental Engagement Team about their community will be built on further through the expansion of the scheme. The links created through the Parent Champions scheme have greatly increased opportunities for harder to reach communities. The scheme has enabled the establishment of clear channels of communication and feedback in communities who would not ordinarily be able to engage with services.

The Parents' Assembly can be found on Twitter, @SheffParents, and Facebook, www.facebook.com/parentsassembly, where news stories of interest to parents and carers are posted twice a week.

“The Parent Champions at Owler Brook have been instrumental in further developing links with our Slovak Roma community. They have received high quality training which has greatly increased their confidence to support others in a very positive and proactive way. They have encouraged other parents to engage in school activities and supported them to do so. We are very proud of the work they are doing in our school community.

Headteacher, Owler Brook Primary School

