

## **Parent Champions case study - Wandsworth: Supporting parents of disabled children**

### **The Project**

The London Borough of Wandsworth, in south London has a large proportion of residents who were born outside the UK – 26% compared to the national average of 10%. It also has a larger than average number of families affected by disability. Therefore the need to reach families who are unfamiliar with services and who may not know about support for their disabled child has been the key objective of the Parent champion scheme in Wandsworth.

Wandsworth Parent Champions reach out to parents in a number of ways: Supporting families of disabled children to know what services are available locally; encouraging families to sign up to the Disabled Children's Register; promoting the WAND card and raising awareness of disability issues to local businesses, services and attractions.

### **Disabled Children's Register and the WAND card**

Like other councils, Wandsworth has a Disabled Children's Register, which families of disabled children aged 0-19 can voluntarily join. Through it, members receive regular information about activities and services and are able to give their feedback so that the council and health services have a better understanding of their needs.

In 2012 the WAND card was introduced as a direct result of feedback from members of the Disabled Children's Register. The card is a handy form of ID which parents say has helped to reduce the need to give lengthy explanations when seeking assistance while out and about. The card also gives concessions to families to local attractions such as Battersea Park Children's Zoo and leisure centres. It also enables free parking whilst at hospital or council appointments and can be used for fast-tracking in a growing number of local stores and services. All children in receipt of middle or upper rate Disabled Living Allowance (or equivalent) who join the Disabled Children's Register (DCR), qualify for the WAND card so that they can feel more confident about getting out and about with family or friends and making the most of local facilities.

In order to increase awareness of the Wand Card and the Disabled Children's Register, Parent Champion volunteers were recruited in the spring of 2014 via the DCR newsletter. Nine volunteers underwent Family and Childcare Trust training and undertook outreach work during the summer and autumn school terms. As well as being existing WAND cardholding families themselves, the Parent Champions added real value with their expertise in languages which included: Polish, Cantonese/Mandarin, Twi, Edo, Bengali, Hindi and Urdu.

Through visiting schools, summer fairs, local community events and talking to SENCos, Parent Champions have contributed to increasing the members on the Disabled Children's Register by over 33% in their first 8 months of operation.

### **Raising awareness of disability**

As well as encouraging families to join the DCR and benefit from the WAND card, Parent Champions have also been actively involved in raising awareness of disability among local businesses and recruiting more 'Wandmakers'. The local shopping centre as well as retail outlets, places to eat and other local businesses are now signing up to the card with their encouragement.

Families with children with special educational needs and disabilities often face a stressful time visiting shops, getting convenient parking near shops or hospital and family excursions sometimes have to be abandoned at great expense. The Wand card alleviates some of these stresses and shops who have signed up to it, display a WAND sticker in their window. The disability awareness training offered through the scheme to the local shopping centre means that their staff are more aware of the challenges that families with disabled children face and more confident about how to be of help.

### **Linking with local services**

Wandsworth is fortunate to have a dedicated Enhanced Children's Centre offering early learning and play opportunities for disabled children under the age of five. Parent Champions received their training at the Centre and in turn have visited the drop-in sessions there to meet parents and tell them about the WAND card Disabled Children's Register. Many parents and carers have fed back that it was good to hear about the scheme via other users and this has been an extra incentive for them to join up.

### **Lucia Daniels, Project co-ordinator, describes some unexpected outcomes of delivering the parent champions scheme**

"With only a very small staff team, one of the things we wanted to ensure was that our volunteers received adequate support, so we have pulled together a team of mentors and this has had the additional benefit of getting us all working more closely together and improving everyone's knowledge. For the volunteers, it has been a journey in building their confidence getting out there and talking to other families – in some cases enhancing their use of English and finding out more themselves about what is on offer. We have been able to offer them the opportunity of coaching to help with planning their next steps, via the Council's in-house coaching network. Despite the usual sort of difficulties all families experience, plus others only families with disabled members have, all our dedicated Parent Champions have returned from hospital, family crises and other distractions, determined to keep up the project."

### **Next steps**

They will also be making sure that the Disabled Children's Register and WAND card information is out there as part of Wandsworth's "Local Offer" WANDhub, promoted via the Family Information Service website to families and the professionals working with them. Parents, carers and professionals need to know about the Local Offer and the Parent Champion model is a great way to help spread the word about what's available, including the WAND card.

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!