

Radical Efficiency in Early Years Settings: Community Ambassadors in Bradford

Some background information

The Bradford Transforming Early Years team brings together the Heaton Children's Centre and the Upper Heaton Working Together Partnership under the leadership of the Lead Director for Heaton Children's Services.

Upper Heaton Working Together (UHWT) is a partnership involving the local council, churches, mosques, schools, health service, neighbourhood watch, local residents and police. Through collaboration, UHWT is driving forward a locally-led strategy for community cohesion.

Heaton is a culturally, socially and economically diverse area of Bradford. The focus area for the Transforming Early Years project is an estate in Heaton which has recently seen a demographic shift from predominantly white to a mix of white, South Asian and Eastern European families. There are sharply polarised groups on the estate: people involved in crime and those who are 'scared to go out'.

Reconceptualising the challenge

The Bradford team wants to address the fear, social isolation and lack of parental aspiration that they see affecting vulnerable families. Carrying out **ethnographic research** with residents gave them vital new insights into the depths of fear, exhaustion and powerlessness as they are felt by parents.

Heaton is currently a fragmented community with weak networks of support within and between families. Services reflect this and are fragmented too. Links between professionals and a significant number of vulnerable families are poor.

The team recognises that services have been uncoordinated and professionals mistrustful of each other, which has prevented them from building a community of support for families. They have also been failing to ask families what services they would value and families felt 'done to', which discourages positive engagement with professionals. **Service Blueprinting** has helped the team to rethink their strategy for service provision; to stop rushing to a solution and make sure that they have all the information they need to redesign services that are better, not just different.

They also completed a **Resource Audit** to work out the cost of existing services for each family.

"When you hear how people close their curtains so they don't have to see drug deals going on outside their front doors, it gets the fires going and makes you want to work even harder to make a difference"

Ethnographic Research

Working with and listening to parents and children in the community offers a fresh perspective and new insights on old problems.

Service Blueprinting

Utilising user journeys to map new services highlights strengths and weaknesses in the design.

Resource Audit

A review of how much is spent, on what, for whose benefit, stimulates important conversations about equity and value for money.

New solutions

In Bradford's redesigned service for families with young children, parent peer supporters called **Community Ambassadors** will work to build trust and rapport with local families, be trained to offer continuous, low-level support to families and make connections with professionals when needed. Community Ambassadors will not come from 'perfect' families; they'll be real people from the community who have the capacity to manage, who struggle and survive difficult times and who can then share their real life experiences with others.

"We will be working with parents who have skills to do even better, to influence those who don't see they have the potential. Some families think that that is their lot."

'Support Ambassadors' (named, professional representatives from all related services from the police to social care) will train and support the Community Ambassadors. They will also work with the Community Ambassadors to reshape their own practice to better support the community, and model new approaches with their professional peers.

Existing professional staff in the Children's Centre will take on a reduced but more focussed role, through the Support Ambassador network, supporting the Community Ambassadors and making targeted family interventions where necessary.

There will be **better use of existing spaces**, schools, children's centres, places of worship, a community café, shops, and people's homes, which will be open at times that suit families. The team has plans to rent an empty house on the estate from the local housing association and set up a 'real life house'. Inside, Community Ambassadors will share real life experiences, for example to model playing with children in a less threatening, more realistic environment than the Children's Centre.

"As well as providing a less threatening environment, the house will provide parents with the chance to see that in real houses you do have toys left out, and help parents to share tips and ideas for times such as bath-time and bedtime in a more real way.."

The team from Bradford are setting out to build continuous, community-based support for families and give community members a sense of power over their own lives. They aim to create new, shared community norms around good parenting and how to create a resilient family life with high aspirations for all.

Progress made towards implementation

Designing roles for community ambassadors

Chellow is an area of Heaton in Bradford, where many vulnerable families live, who are not well served by the existing children's centre service. A community-based volunteer noticed the word 'hello' in the middle of Chellow. This seemed to capture the welcome that the early years team wanted to extend to the community and so became the name they gave to their Community Ambassadors.

Chellows work with families and professionals, known as Support Ambassadors, to organise services so they improve outcomes for children. Chellows are being recruited and trained to act as:

- **Friendly Face Chellows** who people can go to, to find out about the neighbourhood; what's going on and where to go. Friendly Face Chellows model good citizenship and help to create a more positive image of the place they live.

Different...

The fundamental shift here is in the 'front-line' support around families with young children, which will comprise parents who are coping well, recruited and trained to offer different levels of support to other families according to their circumstances. It might be low-level contact to help families to feel confident and connected to the community, or more highly-trained support to help with particular behaviour issues. Parents offering support will be trained by and connected with professionals to whom they can turn for advice when necessary. Equally importantly, those parents will be training those professionals to reshape their practice based on what they're learning about how to work effectively with families. This turns the current model upside down. Families are in charge of who they work with and how, drawing on professionals when necessary - professionals are no longer the first port of call, and do not direct how support works.

Better...

This new approach aims to reach all families, including the most vulnerable. Ongoing, consistent support contrasts strongly with one off interventions, often around crises or problems that are common at the moment.

By providing a common broker - the parent supporters - there is the potential to coordinate and join up the professionals providing background support, as well as making their practice more effective for families.

By empowering and connecting participating families, it should become possible to build the community's resilience and aspirations.

- **Information Hub Chellows** who have dedicated time each week to be on call in local shops, the library and children's centres to offer information about different services and contacts. Information Hub Chellows signpost the services and support available to families.
- **Coaches** who befriend vulnerable families, visit them in their homes and meet them at the shops or the café. They provide regular, practical help in the way that a mother or grandmother would, coaching and advising the family as the friendship grows.

Chellows in the coaching role need lots of support and so they receive coaching at weekly sessions and accreditation is available too. Friendly face and information hub Chellows meet every month with Support Ambassadors to share information and build their relationships and skills together.

At these meetings, Chellows provide invaluable feedback from the community to the Support Ambassadors about the quality and impact of services from families' points of view.

Place and space

Some of the Chellows' work with families takes place in the Children's Centre. But for the most part they are out and about in the community, welcoming families into their own homes for coffee and a chat and meeting them in community spaces like the local school or library.

There's also a phone line and website managed by the Chellows, that families can access as a first step.

The team hopes to rent a house on the estate soon, to provide a different kind of venue for families to meet with Chellows, away from the Children's Centre and their own home, if they prefer. The aim is to provide as many points and places of access as possible, to encourage families to make contact.

Leadership and governance

The leadership team for the new service comprises the Leader of Family Learning, a headteacher, two Community Ambassadors and two Support Ambassadors.

The Chellows' work is overseen by the governing body of the Children's Centre. Other models are being explored.

A key challenge for the future will be succession planning for the ongoing leadership of the transformation work, which at the moment depends on the passion and energy of a very small team and significantly on one person at the centre.

Interagency collaboration

The professionals who act as Support Ambassadors come from a wide range of services. By working together and with Chellows they realise they stand a far greater chance of meeting the needs of families who are struggling and most in need of help. They believe that everyone living and working on the estate has a role to play in improving the life chances of children growing up in their community.

Practitioners from health, social services, education and housing are working with the vicar, the librarian, neighbourhood wardens, youth workers and the Job Centre.

Elected members of the local council and local business leaders are getting involved too. They see the benefits of a more secure and stable community with fewer families desperate to leave.

Communicating the vision

People tell us they don't know about things that are going on in the community. So we are going to communicate with every household to let them know what we've been doing and what's coming next.

We're producing trolley fobs and fridge magnets to let people know about the service and the Chellows have fleeces with a logo on them so they are visible in the community.

These ideas for communications and raising awareness and for the logo came from the community. They were proud of themselves.

The Family Support Team is now totally convinced that this is a much better way of working.

It's changed the focus from anxiety about who does what, to making sure that families in the area get the support they need when funding is reduced.

It made us talk about better value and more efficient ways of working.

The project in numbers

In 2009-10 the number of families actively supported by the Children's Centre was 165. In 2011-12 this will increase to 330 and in 2012-13 to 550, more than doubling the number of families accessing the new service.

The new service will engage around 28 volunteers in the three Chellow roles donating a total of 9,912 hours each year between them, an average of just over seven hours per week each.

Assessing efficiency

The Bradford team gathered a range of data in order that a cost analysis of their new service could be undertaken. The headlines from this analysis show that:

	Existing service	Redesigned service, year 1	Difference	Difference (%)
The redesigned service will cost less:	£257,673	£159,256	-£98,417	-38%
And yet reach more families:	165	550	385	233%
Together, this results in a reduction of unit cost:	£1,562	£290	-£1,272	-81%

Where next?

"At the moment we have neighbourhoods, in three years we will have communities."

Trained and active Community Ambassadors

- There will be a team of Community Ambassadors of varying cultures, ages and genders, who are the hub of an inner support network for parents who live in the community
- Community Ambassadors will proactively organise community events and recruit further volunteers.
- Community Ambassadors will be trained to provide better services at a lower cost than professionals e.g. running a session at their own house on how they get the kids to bed, or leading a 'clean up' group to remove rubbish from people's gardens.
- There will be a team of 'Support Ambassadors' made up of staff that are currently based in the Children's Centre and beyond in the community (PCSO, Family Support Workers, neighbourhood warden, social worker, health visitor, midwife, play worker).
- Support Ambassadors will provide an initial training programme and ongoing support for Community Ambassadors (for example advising parents on how to brush children's teeth: *"The advice has to be what a dentist would recommend, but a parent who has been taught to do this can pass this on"*.)

Effective deployment of resources

- More of paid staff time will be focused on the most vulnerable families, supporting those with the most challenging issues and preventing crises
- There will be less duplication of effort and cost. *"We found that one family in one week had 59 hours worth of effort and input. This has to be duplication."*

Lower cost...

In the short term, fewer children's centre professionals will be required as their roles shift to be facilitators and supporters of the peer support team.

As the team reaches more families, the unit cost of each interaction will go down. Fewer highly qualified professionals from other services should also be needed to do the 'low level' front line work now undertaken by parent supporters.

Perhaps most importantly, over time, if support succeeds in building families' resilience, there should be far less spent on expensive crisis interventions including foster care and family courts.

Safer, more integrated and better off communities

- People will be happier, part of the community and less fearful going about their daily business.
- House prices will rise on the estate.
- There will be a greater number of community events that are inclusive in nature
- They expect a range of improved outcomes for children, from more parents saying that they can get their children to bed, to improved attendance at nurseries, greater numbers of children experiencing a language-rich home environment, being 'school-ready' and better able to separate from their main carers.

The effectiveness of Community Ambassadors will partly be judged in relation to the types of people that they are able to recruit to the role.

Next steps for the team

Four Community Ambassadors have already shown willingness and enthusiasm to lead the work forward. Together they have designed a community fun event where they will try and recruit more Ambassadors (perhaps six to eight).

Governance arrangements for the Community Ambassador programme will be discussed in anticipation that parents will be invited to run the Partnership. This may have a formal link to the Upper Heaton Working Together Partnership.

A Family Support Worker within the core team will soon begin to talk to staff about how their roles could change. At a time when staff are already anxious about job cuts this is an important and difficult part of the project;

"In the past we've said 'let's work together, understand the issue and come up with a plan'. Now we are getting to a harder part of the process and listing parts of people's jobs which could be integrated into an ambassador role. They are realising what's at stake for their own roles."