

Radical Efficiency in Early Years Settings: Parents as agents of change in Corby

Some background information

The Transforming Early Years team in Corby currently comprises representatives from children's centres, the local authority and parent users, and there is a commitment to embracing all centres and leading an approach that is inclusive and Corby-wide. The team recognises the risks inherent in the slicing or cutting of services to reduce costs and they are using the Transforming Early Years project to gain support in managing these risks in a way which can extend reach whilst reducing costs.

There is a history in Corby of working in partnership with parents as policymakers and co-constructors of services in practice and provision. There is a desire to take this further and deeper in order to engage families in some of the most deprived areas of Corby.

Achieving more successful and strategic partnerships across the children's centres in Corby, where services are still largely professionally-led, will involve building on the existing will and resources in the area (Corby Learning Partnership, Safer Community Teams, Homestart, Primary Care Trust) to work collectively, focused on shared ambitions for better outcomes for families.

“We see parents becoming the agents of change and the drivers of transformation.”

Reconceptualising the challenge

The Corby team wants to work more effectively with the most vulnerable families to create services which meet their needs, whilst also reducing costs. They recognise the need to adapt and change how and what resources are used to deliver services as a key lever in service change and improvement - and to do so in ways that create an authentic role in co-design and delivery for parents.

Some of the most vulnerable families in Corby are not engaged in shaping or finding partners in services that best meet their needs. Current strategies for engaging parents in service re-design and delivery are uncoordinated and far less effective than is desirable.

The Transforming Early Years work is seen as part of wider strategic developments as opposed to a one off initiative. The team is focused on the strategic changes necessary to build upon existing work to create parent-driven early years services across Corby.

Service Blueprinting for the initiative has helped to find a common language to describe what they wanted to do and achieve and to express the value of their work and enable them to explore that with others.

Service Blueprinting

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

An early **Resource Audit** identified that overall expenditure may be reduced by:

- Delivering more needs-driven early intervention services and so reduce expenditure on high-cost acute intervention.
- Employing fewer professionals.
- Avoiding duplication of services.
- Decommissioning of current activities with marginal impact.
- Effective systematic volunteer training programme.

New solutions

“We will use parents to enhance intelligence gathering and provision of appropriate support.”

The team’s core idea was originally to develop a team of volunteer parents, grandparents and carers as community or **‘street champions’**, who will work with professionals to shape and deliver a set of services that are community-led and focus on whole families.

This has been expanded as an idea to an ambition that the parent-led provision becomes a constituted parent-owned mutual. Street champions will gather critical information that can be used to target and adapt provision, e.g. about changing demographics, levels of drug and alcohol use. This parent body can be commissioned by the existing children’s centres to develop these new areas of intelligence and provision. In turn, the parent group can ‘commission’ and ‘shape’ activity or service from existing centres based on their field intelligence – perhaps becoming the local commissioner which receives the single budget for Corby’s early years provision.

Progress made towards implementation

Developing roles for volunteers

Parents as volunteers in service design and delivery is key to the success of the Corby project. The team in Corby has devised a volunteer ‘ladder of participation’ to show how they anticipate that parent volunteers may grow and develop their skills and capacity as advocates for families. Each level includes training and accreditation routes and training sessions have already taken place for a group of parents currently involved.

Level 4	Parents who are ‘community activists’ in that they advocate and lobby for a variety of better services for the greater good of children and families in Corby.
Level 3	Parents who are ‘single issue’ activists having created self-help/support networks with other parents who share the same issue.
Level 2	Parents who are running groups and/or are Parent Governors in schools or similar.
Level 1	Parents who are volunteers and/or parents with clear ideas about how to implement change in public services and the desire to follow this through.

Resource Audit

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

Different...

The Corby team wants to move from existing model of a predominantly centre-based and professionally-led service (which involves parents variably) to one with “parents being the agents of change and drivers of transformation.”

The new provision will be more targeted to need, will engage current priority localities, and will significantly expand reach and service utilisation rates. The team is determined to create a role for families within the governance structure of children’s centres to ensure they are more involved in strategic decision making and that they have budget-holding responsibility.

Marketing and communications

Ethnography work and discussions with parents suggest that families will respond positively to the opportunity to be part of this new initiative. Planned engagement with families will take place through direct approach to those who may be potential members of the One Corby Parent Coalition – parents who are experienced parent champions and advocates – as well as press releases, leaflets to all households and a bespoke website (currently under construction). In addition, there is a clear intention to ensure that every ward in the borough is represented by at least one parent, so the team will be forging clear links to representative and decision making processes across Corby.

Leadership and governance

The One Corby Parent Coalition will be constituted as a parent-owned mutual and the different possible approaches to governance are currently being explored by a group of parents working with the project team.

Wide-reaching changes to personnel and structures within the County Council made during the course of the project have made it hard for the leaders to make the progress they had hoped. However, as local-area working is the priority model for service-change in Northamptonshire, the team believe the project could be a prototype for wider use in the county. Leaders have met with newly appointed council personnel and local councilors to discuss a way forward.

Engaging in political debate

Before the recent election, details of the coalition and requests for support were sent to all the prospective councilors. The parent group has also started to get directly involved in political discussions, specifically on the issue of funding cuts, about which they met with local councilors. As a result the threat of severe cuts was put on hold, demonstrating the strength of voice already developed through the parent group.

Securing a devolved budget

The project team recognise that in order for the parent coalition to have real power and significance they will need to be able to make decisions about how money is spent and to commission services directly. To this end, the local authority's willingness to devolve the early years budget to the parent-owned mutual is critical to success. Because of the current reorganisation of children's services staff within the county, many supporters of the work are moving on and creating new relationships and partnerships with new decision makers is proving essential.

Outcomes and metrics

The team has identified the following short, medium and longer-term outcomes for measuring the impact of the project.

Short term:

- Participation in the coalition in terms of representation from all areas of Corby and a governance structure in place.
- Participation in initial campaigns – planned to be about safer road crossing and play spaces.
- Participation in decisions about further, more wide-reaching initiatives.
- Ways in which One Corby Parent Coalition is used by the borough council and other providers to ascertain parent voice and opinion.

Medium term:

- Numbers of volunteers engaged in training programme and 'stepping up' the ladder.
- Actual numbers of families engaging in services.

Better...

The new approach will ensure programmes are more congruent with perceived need in the community and more targeted to the highest value for children.

The approach has a community capacity-building dimension, aiming to unearth community leaders and volunteers who, with peer support, will offer a service with more reach and more sensitivity to users.

It will also bring greater coherence and cohesion, and will involve building on the existing will and resources in the area to work collectively, focused on shared ambitions for better outcomes for families.

- Numbers of families previously not engaging in services.
- Model being trialled elsewhere in Northamptonshire.

Long term:

- Improved outcomes for children in terms of numbers of families engaging with statutory services.
- Improved outcomes for children in terms of numbers of children entering the care service.
- Changes in professional practice to one where parents are drivers of practice at all levels.
- The model widely applied across Northamptonshire.

What next?

“There will be a far more proactive, strong, decisive parent voice across all children’s services in Corby.”

Engaged and empowered communities

- The community will be more empowered and self-determined as parents move from service users to leaders, designers and providers.
- Families that are not currently engaged will be engaged on their own terms and share in decision making rather than ‘attend’ a service.
- Parents will share budgetary responsibility with the local authority and other agencies in the town.
- Trained volunteers will work more closely with professionals in practical decision making and activity.

Clear evidence of impact on outcomes for families

- Impact of the new approaches will be mapped and tracked in detail.
- Effectiveness of the joint use of resources will be judged in relation to participation and improved outcomes for those families.
- Impact indicators will include a reduction in numbers of children on the child protection register, families needing support from social care, and the degree to which volunteer training and support builds community capital.

Next steps for the project

“Which services should be commissioned, do we want to be commissioned, and what are the services and who will be responsible for delivering them? Will it be social care, the Children’s Centre or GPs?”

A key next step is to determine how the professional knowledge, expertise and experience from a range of sectors can be used to develop and support this parent-led body.

“It’s critical to think through the recognition of professional knowledge and how that works alongside parent volunteers and the decision making body.”

The local authority will need to be excited by the possibility and willing to create the enabling conditions to make it happen – in particular a willingness to devolve the early years budget to the parent-owned mutual. Active enablement from the LA will be important, but in return Corby sees the model as a potential prototype for wider use within Northamptonshire.

Lower cost...

The new service will impact on more families, connect with more hard to reach families and do so using more volunteer and peer-to-peer approaches.

It will engage and impact on more of those families that create intervention costs for other services down the line.

There will be fewer paid workers and trained volunteers will work more closely with professionals in practical decision making and activity to tackle specific issues with families.

Being more strategic and more aligned across centres, offers potential for ‘radically efficient’ savings to be realised.

It will decommission current well-used but peripherally effective aspects of provision.