

Radical Efficiency in Early Years Settings: Community-owned services – Parents 1st and One Plus One

Some background information

The Transforming Early Years project brings together One plus One and Parents 1st to work with families in West Basildon, Essex.

Parents 1st is a social enterprise dedicated to building the strengths and skills of individuals and communities. They are committed to improving outcomes for children and families through peer support programmes and worked with One Plus One, a research and training organisation supporting parents, to develop the highly successful Community Mothers programme in Thurrock.

One Plus One is a team of researchers, practitioners and information specialists whose aim is to enhance understanding of how family relationships contribute to the well being of adults and children. They create resources for professionals and volunteers working in the frontline of family support. Over 2,000 frontline practitioners and volunteers have been trained to use the resources. One Plus One estimate that they have achieved outreach to around one million families.

“The community development approach is where we come from, working with families, bringing back issues that families identify. Those will be taken on in partnership with the local community.”

Reconceptualising the challenge

The Parents 1st and the One Plus One team know some of the external pressures that problems such as street crime, vandalism and hostility, heap on families who are ‘just surviving’ in West Basildon.

These families often have a limited awareness of available services, can’t access the help they need and can be put off by ‘judgemental’ professionals. As a result, much of the existing early years support is accessed by affluent families who are already able to cope well. At the other end of the spectrum, a high proportion of resources are spent on vulnerable families in crisis.

Existing professional services don’t really reflect individuals’ and community needs and **ethnographic research** has provided an opportunity for staff to talk to mothers and fathers and gain new insights into how difficult it is even for a fairly assertive mother to assume she wasn’t being judged by professionals, and about how levels of crime greatly reduces people’s confidence and happiness in the community.

The whole period of pregnancy and the earliest months of family life are a

Ethnographic Research

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

critically important time for early development and the long-term health and social outcomes for children. People becoming parents, especially for the first time, may need lots of support, so this is a great time for early years services to make a big impact. However, existing services are not designed to support this group, focusing instead on families with children aged 2½-5 years old.

When a **resource audit** showed how much more money is spent on children from the age of 2½ years than on early prevention and disadvantaged families, the team decided that the most important thing they could do would be to redirect money from services for families with 2½ year olds to early provision.

So Parents 1st and One Plus One will develop a new model for Children's Centres that will focus investment and support around pregnancy and the earliest months of a child's life. It will build on mutual support and trust within the local community and make a real difference to family and community relationships.

New solutions

The team has two 'big ideas' for transforming early years. Their first idea is to develop a **peer-support hub owned by local families**, focussed on providing support to families from conception up until 12 weeks. The new service will be radically different from anything currently available in West Basildon and will involve training parents from the community to be expert peer supporters. These expert parents will operate as a multi-skilled team of personal pregnancy assistants (listening, coordinating services), and provide more and more tailored support for expectant and new parents at important points in their 'journey'. They will also develop a self-assessment tool for new parents to help them to identify the range of services they might need.

The second idea is to turn one or more of the Children's Centres in West Basildon into a **community owned mutual** that is owned and run by local residents. Community representatives, not the council, will decide what services are on offer, and consistent approaches will be used by support providers across different services (health visitors, GPs and volunteers). The key difference this will make to the current service is that families and members of the community will be the first port of call rather than professionals. The team believe this will encourage families to look earlier rather than later for the support they need. One of the benefits of operating as a mutual will be that the board will be able to challenge poor practice or ask staff to leave if they feel they can't or won't support the new, community based approach. The mutual will shift the balance of its spending on families to the early years, away from 2½-5 year olds.

Progress made towards implementation

Developing new partnerships and building internal capacity

For the Parents 1st and One Plus One team there has been considerable effort and success in setting up new relationships to support the project towards implementation. As a new social enterprise it has been challenging finding the time to fully take part in the project and a recent move to work with an external consultant has provided valuable additional capacity and expertise at a critical stage. The consultant has worked on developing a business plan for the new service and establishing a partnership with another organisation in order to submit a tender for children's centre services in Essex.

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 new approach will see the current focus of investment from Children's Centre budgets turned on its head. The majority of spending will be on families from conception to the first few months of a child's life - not on the two to five year olds who currently benefit from the majority of funding.

Today's model of support would be inverted - trained peer supporters would take the place of Children's Centre professionals to provide the front line of support for families. They would work with parents as soon as possible after they discover they are pregnant to understand their aspirations and concerns, and co-design a programme of support that suits them. Peer supporters would be connected with professionals, including midwives and health visitors to create the best package of support and to help shift their practice to be more respectful of and responsive to families.

In thinking through how to present the project to commissioners, the team has developed an even clearer rationale and has developed an approach to measuring outcomes robustly.

Creating tools

The team is developing an evaluation tool for the project. It is an antenatal needs assessment tool that will enable expectant parents to assess their own needs (health, well-being, preparing to be a parent, etc.) alongside a peer supporter. The tool has a two-fold purpose – it will be useful for peer supporters as a way of opening out discussion on key topics that have been shown by research to be of particular interest to expectant parents, and it will enable parents to see how these things relate to them individually.

Growing the commitment and support of staff

The team has been very conscious of the need to work closely with Children's Centre staff as they get the project off the ground. This has been through workshops and presentations, asking 'what would success look like to you?', going to staff meetings, etc. Within a general context of instability, where children's centre services are going out to tender and people are unsure about their jobs, anything new is seen as a threat and these conversations can be challenging. It has been necessary to strike a delicate balance between challenging the status quo, being sensitive to where people are feeling threatened or where they are open to discussing things informally. Often it has been about encouraging people to question things in order to establish ownership.

“They want to protect their own job and feel safe at a time when you are being threatened all the time, someone coming in and saying there's a new way of doing things, well we've always done it like this, they fight their corner and it's a difficult time. But you've also got the opportunity to say this is a new way of working that could be the answer.”

Developing the role of peer supporters

In the new early years service, peer supporters will work with families from early pregnancy until they are no longer required. The team believe this model has the potential to reach greater numbers of families and provide help early before the family is in deep crisis and support families as they move from one service to another.

The peer supporters' work will contribute to strengthening the resilience of families by working with them when relationships break down, supporting them to find their own solutions and solve their own problems, whilst resolving their own conflict. The work of the peer supporters will contribute to building stronger communities who are able to meet their own needs and solve their own problems.

The peer supporters will be part of the community hub but all service providers who work from and with the community hub will receive training which enables them to support families who are experiencing relationship problems. The overall aim is to reduce the number of families who break up when conflict or difficulties arise. The team recognise that the need to create a common ethos, vision and way of working within a community is one of the keys to the success of this radically different model which will require constant training and support of the team and extended team to deliver services in a different way.

Prototyping...

Trying out elements of the new service as a way of testing assumptions and answering questions about what works.

The team has been working with a group of volunteer peer supporters on about how best to engage with expectant parents, particularly more vulnerable ones. A range of options are being tested, from monthly or two weekly antenatal drop-in with lots of different services and ways of raising awareness to antenatal parents get them through the door. Two temporary outreach workers have been recruited from the existing pool of volunteers and they are going to test out the approaches in the area of West Basildon where the cluster of children's centres is.

“We are making a case for peer support and a different model, family-centred, community ownership model. Services delivered are relevant to peoples' lives, rather than professionals deciding what services they think might solve the problem.

A lot is around peer support model volunteering and paid support too. Cheaper because professionals (more costly) are used only when needed.”

Planning for impact

The team has identified the following key areas of impact along with associated mechanisms and indicators:

Increase reach, especially to families who most need support by:

- Making support more attractive and less threatening to more families.
- Peer supporters increasing capacity to support more families on an ongoing basis.

Indicators:

Percentage of first time families reached in local super-output areas.

Increase resilience in families by:

- Reaching families at key moment of transition to family life.
- Giving people a sense of control over their own lives.

Indicators:

Breastfeeding rates and age at first weaning.

Levels of early attachment between baby and mother (Care Index).

Immunisation rates.

Increase social capital and informal support in the community by:

- Stimulating more community activity through norms of mutual support.
- Local families being better connected and more used to supporting each other.

Indicators:

Social capital index – seven simple questions to assess family's social capital.

Assessing efficiency

The Parents 1st and One Plus One 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		Difference		Difference (%)	
The redesigned service will cost less:	£314,595	£249,725		-£64,871		-21%	
And yet reach more families:	284	Yr 1 322	Yr 2 383	Yr 1 38	Yr 2 99	Yr 1 13%	Yr 2 35%
Together, this results in a reduction of unit cost:	£1,108	Yr 1 £776	Yr 2 £605	Yr 1 -£332	Yr 2 -£503	Yr 1 -30%	Yr 2 55%

Where next?

The team want to bring about two key changes in West Basildon: to engage new families in their service through brokering skills in the community, and to secure the future of the redesigned service by encouraging mutual ownership of Children's Centres. This will also enable new suppliers to support the early years service.

Targeted peer-support for expectant and new parents

- Every expectant parent will be contacted by a skilled, (probably paid) peer supporter from the team and they will have a meaningful contact with the antenatal mum and her partner as soon as they find she is pregnant.

Lower cost...

This model should be significantly lower cost for the local authority. By training parents to provide front line support, some of the professionals previously doing this work would become volunteer trainers and supporters whilst others would no longer be needed.

By reaching more families, sooner, the unit cost of interactions with each should drop significantly. Over time, working effectively with parents and children during the earliest months of family life should mean significant reductions in spending on crisis interventions.

Finally, the ability to leverage in greater community resources, like the credit union, with the same budget, represents far greater value for money.

- The conversation will provide factual information about the kinds of group work and one-to-one support available to both parents and the wider family, and help the mum to assess her own needs. It will also make both parents feel special and aware that the door remains open for the future.
- This universal engagement with antenatal parents will build trust and rapport, and when volunteers see signs of an issue arising, they will help people work it through for themselves.
- All couples will be supported, but the more vulnerable parents would be helped at a much earlier stage than they are at present with issues such as early bonding and attachment that are critical to the development of the child.

Active community involvement and new roles for staff

- Lots more members of the community will be actively involved in peer support as members of the support hub or mutual.
- Services will be run by this community mutual with a management board that allocates its own resources, and which recruits and trains its own staff.
- Staff will be committed to an empowerment model, rather than a dependency, illness-focused model – one that has families, rather than professionals at its heart.
- Local people will be at the helm, listening to the needs of the community and acting on the wider issues that impact on parenting. Eventually, experienced volunteers will set up their own social enterprises, becoming new suppliers offering services on a self-employed basis.

Next steps for the team

The team are off great start so far. The first cohort of peer support volunteers have already been recruited across the five Children's Centres in West Basildon and have completed an initial taster course. They have now been enrolled onto their introductory accredited training which starts in March.

The team and volunteers will be prototyping some of their ideas for engaging expectant parents over the next two to three months. They are considering pharmacies, supermarkets and antenatal booking clinics as new places to meet newly pregnant mums, let them know about the new service and test out their ideas with them.

The team is focusing on building a compelling case to present to the local authority (Essex) to persuade them to 'spin out' the West Basildon Centre (and possibly four others) to their control.

The team is conscious that it must work to ensure good relationships between staff and volunteers. This includes reassuring existing staff who have concerns about the risks involved in the volunteer-led project, and making sure that volunteers as a group feel supported.

Better...

The approach will work with parents at the critical transition moment in family life to help build the capacities and home environment that will support them to flourish later. It should also connect with the families who currently feel alienated from services run by professionals, who they see as distant and judgmental.

It should improve the effectiveness of the complementary support they receive from professionals as their practice is reshaped and they are used in a targeted way, when really needed.

Furthermore, the norms of peer support are expected to generate other community-led support that might be housed in the traditional Children's Centre, including the credit union and clothes swaps.