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Parent Champions
Final Evaluation report

March 2014

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Acknowledgements

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Coram: Evaluation Partner

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Executive summary

This final report represents findings of an independent evaluation of the Parent Champions programme, delivered by Family and Childcare Trust and Action for Children and funded by the Department of Education. The focus of the programme was piloting a children's centre-based model for the Parent Champions programme. Working with the delivery partner, Action for Children, six sites were identified where schemes would be run from children's centres. The idea was that schemes would benefit from being embedded in the network of services and activities available at children's centres. Volunteers working as Parent Champions talked to parents in the community encouraging them to make use of services and, in particular, available childcare. These pilot schemes tested the efficacy of this children's centre-based delivery model. As a further part of the programme, Family and Childcare Trust continued providing general support to local authorities and Third Sector organisations to deliver Parent Champions schemes. The new and existing schemes in this 'National Network' were more loosely affiliated to the programme and received capacity building support from Family and Childcare Trust.

The delivery partners, Family and Childcare Trust and Action for Children, received £536,411 to fund the programme from April 2013 to March 2014. Coram was commissioned in August 2013 as the evaluation partner.

This report examines the programme's performance over the first year, the Pilot phase of the project. Reflecting the emphasis of the programme the evaluation was primarily focused on analysing the performance of the Action for Children pilot schemes. The report therefore considers in detail the pilot schemes considering implementation and delivery of the model as well as the outcomes and impact produced. The report also includes analysis of schemes in the National Network where data was available.

Key Findings from the Action for Children pilot schemes

The pilot sites demonstrated the effectiveness of the peer-based Parent Champions model. Parent Champions proved effective in communicating to parents and encouraging the take-up of local children's services. A high proportion of contact with parents made by Parent Champions led to some action being taken by the parent. For example, in just over half of cases the referral given by the Parent Champion was used by the parent. For slightly under half, the service recommended became regularly used by the parent. And, also for slightly under half, the parent reported an additional impact as a result of the Parent Champion meeting, e.g. an awareness of local services.

The willingness of parents to take action after contact with a Parent Champion is testament to the unique character of the relationship with parents. Parents reacted positively to the informal and supportive nature of interactions with Parent Champions. They responded positively to the fact that the Parent Champion was someone like them and was going through the same challenges they were. In this way, Parent Champions naturally offered empathy and support in their conversations and parents felt able to open up and share issues with them. Within this trusting environment parents were able to listen to advice and take on new ideas and suggestions in a way that may not have occurred had the parent received the same information through other channels.

Overall the Parent Champion model benefitted from being based in children's centres. Children's centres offered a valuable organisational resource for schemes that ensured that relevant resources and expertise were close at hand. Parent Champions, for example, benefitted from this professional expertise and support which helped them better understand local children's services and gave them tools to perform effective outreach.

The disadvantage of being located in this hub of services and activities, however, was that Parent Champions tended to make contact with parents in the children's centre they were based in. With parents attending a range of different activities at a centre it was attractive for much Parent Champions work to be undertaken there. Two fifths of contacts (39%) made with parents were made in children's centres. However, this strategy is likely to have hindered the ability of schemes to reach unengaged parents. The high proportion of Parent Champion work undertaken in children's centres may explain the relatively low proportion of disadvantaged parents met by Parent Champions.

There was strong evidence of significant and largely underestimated outcomes for volunteers working as Parent Champions. Parents who started volunteering on the programme were often motivated by a desire to 'give something back to the community'. Their work as a Parent Champion largely fulfilled this aspiration but many also reported gaining an unanticipated personal satisfaction. Sharing the knowledge they had developed as a parent with others and helping fellow parents improve their situation gave Parent Champions a sense of pride and responsibility. This sense of personal efficacy boosted self-confidence and gave Parent Champions a belief that they had valuable skills and experience. A number of schemes reported volunteers had progressed to start training or education or had found employment on the basis of their Parent Champions experience.

Summary Findings:

Parent Outcomes

- Parents showed a high willingness to take action after contact with a Parent Champion:

- In 57% of cases the referral given by the Parent Champion was used by parents with 43% of referrals leading to regular use of the service or activity recommended.
- 44% of contacts with parents led to a general impact on the parent e.g. parenting confidence.

Volunteer outcomes

- Volunteers reported that working as a Parent Champion had been a challenging but very rewarding experience leading to significant gains in personal development and soft skills:
 - Improvement in self confidence and self esteem.
 - Improvement in communication skills and public-speaking ability.
 - Gains in administration skills helping improved employability.
 - Experience led to gaining employment in children's services sector.
 - Feelings of personal efficacy in helping to improve lives of parents and contributing to community.

Implementation

- Delays to the programme set-up had a knock-on effect on local implementation.
- Scheme start-up was influenced by local circumstances which in several cases led to delays where unanticipated difficulties were encountered.
- Schemes that were led by staff who had experience in volunteer recruitment and management were more effective in starting-up than those that did not.
- Strong leadership skills were influential in progressing start-up in local areas.

Systems and support

- Support systems provided for Parent Champions by schemes were robust. Nearly eight out of 10 volunteers (89%) reported they were satisfied with the support provided.
- Family and Childcare Trust provided high quality and relevant guidance and support to schemes. Nearly nine out of 10 (88%) coordinators rated the overall support as 'good' or 'outstanding'.
- A new data collection system was successfully introduced that included monitoring of actions taken by parents after meeting the Parent Champion. The new system was found to be practical and a valuable source of data on individual scheme performance.

Conclusion

- Children's centres offer a number of benefits as an organisational base for schemes. With appropriate support and guidance Parent Champion schemes are likely to prosper in this setting and prove effective in reaching parents and encouraging take-up of children's services.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

This final report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Pilot phase of the children's centre based Parent Champions programme, delivered in partnership by the Family and Childcare Trust and Action for Children and funded by the Department for Education.

The Parent Champions programme was designed to scale up a children's centre peer-to-peer delivery model that informed and engaged with disadvantaged families who had not previously engaged with early education or childcare services. Family and Childcare Trust, the lead partner, received £536,411 from the Department for Education grant priority area 'Promote excellence in early

education and childcare' to fund the Action for Children pilot project, and its wider support to the Parent Champions National Network. The programme was funded for an initial Pilot phase from April 2013 to March 2014. Additional funding for a Year 2 from April 2014 was scheduled subject to performance in the Pilot phase.

Coram was commissioned in August 2013 as evaluation partner for the programme, focusing on assessing the model established in a number of pilot sites in the Action for Children Pilot phase. The framework for evaluation covered process and outcome evaluation approaches to help understand both implementation and impact.

This report examines the performance of the programme, focusing on the development of the delivery model and an assessment of outcomes and impact for parents contacted by Parent Champions as well as for volunteers acting as Parent Champions.

1.2 Programme rationale

The delivery plan aimed to test out best practice developed from previous programmes by supporting six new schemes adopting a children's centre-based delivery model. Action for Children was to operate these schemes using their own network of children's centres.

Alongside these six new Parent Champion schemes, Family and Childcare Trust was also committed to continuing to actively support and promote the development of Parent Champions schemes more widely. This wider Parent Champions National Network activity, also funded by the Department for Education, included support to schemes already running and to local areas interested in starting up new schemes.

The intention was that this dual approach – Action for Children pilot schemes alongside national Network schemes – would help refine best practice as well as develop the programme nationally. Knowledge arising from the focussed work of pilot schemes could be disseminated across the National Network contributing to a cycle of learning and development.

The delivery plan for the programme had an overarching aim to improve access to early education and childcare services for non-engaged disadvantaged families. The plan proposed to pursue these ends by encouraging the use of children's centres, promoting home learning and encouraging take-up of the two and three year old nursery place offer. These specific aims were defined with the Department of Education;

- Encourage wider participation of non-engaged parents in children's centres including through targeted approaches, for example, where appropriate, promoting home learning and doorstep engagement.
- Increase take-up of new two year old and existing three and four year old early education offer and additional early learning/childcare opportunities especially by children from disadvantaged families.

1.3 Evaluation partner role and aims

To develop replicable best practice, Parent Champions was proposed as an evaluated programme. Coram's remit was to evaluate the performance of the overall programme including the Action for Children pilot schemes and support to the wider National Network schemes. Given the focus of the programme on the pilot schemes this area of work would inevitably receive greater attention.

Involvement at an early stage, and the experimental nature of the programme, led to a formative evaluation role for Coram in the pilot phase of the project. Coram aimed to encourage a learning cycle to refine the programme, by acting

as a critical friend during the start-up phase, and providing on-going strategic advice where possible for key project staff.

This final report provides a summative evaluation reflecting on the performance of the programme.

The areas of focus in the final report are as follows:

- Examining the design of the Parent Champions model and how it intended to engage with parents.
- Assessing the process of implementing the model, considering barriers and facilitators to implementation and effective processes.
- Experience of volunteers working as Parent Champions, reflecting on implications for the service model and benefits for volunteers.
- Assessment of the impact on parents contacted by Parent Champions and the outcomes experienced by Parent Champions themselves.

1.4 Evaluation approach

Defining the evaluation framework was an iterative process, responding to the evolving programme structure and the expanding wider National Network. Parenting and family support interventions present a number of challenges to robust evaluation; these include:

- **Attributing causality:** it is difficult to quantify the direct causal impact of family support services – there are many factors that influence a family's outcomes, sustaining linear progress with vulnerable families is difficult, and measurable outcomes may only manifest in the longer term;
- **Capturing qualitative soft outcomes:** the multiple processes involved in delivering a family support service and complexity of problems facing vulnerable families makes the evaluation of outcomes less clear-cut, and reliant on subjective perceptions rather than directly related to inputs; and

- Resources: limited funds for projects, and therefore evaluation, places constraints on capturing data and engaging with the necessary stakeholders.

The evaluation framework developed focused on achievable data collection within the available resources, and meaningful evaluation indicators in light of programme objectives. Underpinning methodological principles produced the following approach:

- Mixed-methods, including both quantitative and qualitative data;
- Whole-programme, including inputs, processes, delivery, and outcomes; and
- '360-degree', including evaluation from a range of perspectives – parents, volunteers, staff, practitioners, and commissioners.¹

In line with this approach, the data collection methods were:

- Quantitative output data recording numbers of parents met, information given, referrals made.
- Quantitative data on the socio-economic profile of the parent met e.g. gender, lone parent, disability, income, age, ethnic background and work status.
- Quantitative outcomes data capturing actions/behaviours prompted by meeting with Parent Champion.

¹ 'Staff' refers to paid staff from the programme, as opposed to volunteers.

- Quantitative impact data capturing whether referral led to regular engagement with service and sustained behaviours at home.
- Regular update discussions with programme staff members.
- In-depth interviews and focus groups in schemes – parent interviews, volunteer interviews, volunteer focus group, and staff interviews.
- Parent Champion and coordinator stakeholder surveys.

1.5 Evaluation methodology

Coram worked with the programme to facilitate an outcomes-focused data collection framework to be trialled by the Action for Children pilot sites. The framework introduced a data collection system that gathered information about the contact with a parent made by the Parent Champion and the information and referrals given. A follow-up phone call was then made four weeks after the initial meeting to gather information on subsequent actions taken by the parent, asking whether any referrals given had been used, and if used, whether the service was now regularly used, and also whether there was other impact on awareness of services, parenting confidence, home learning and knowledge of health issues.

This information from one-to-one parent contacts was completed by the Parent Champions. Schemes also collected the number of parents talked to in group meetings and the number of special activities undertaken to engage with parents e.g. running a stall or attending a group. Schemes were asked to collect all this information and periodically enter data on an online data submission tool.

The longitudinal monitoring of parents provided the data necessary to analyse the outcomes prompted by the conversation with the Parent Champion. For example, the data could show the proportions of referrals made that were used and that led to regular use of the service.

In addition to operational data collection, the evaluation gathered stakeholder perspectives through online surveys with both pilot and wider National Network schemes and qualitative research. This stakeholder research included the following:

- Site visits to two pilot schemes and one Network scheme including interviews with coordinator, staff and parents, and focus group with Parent Champions.
- Online Coordinator survey (n=37)
- Online Parent Champion survey (n=20)
- Interviews with Family and Childcare Trust and Action for Children programme staff.

1.6 Structure of the report

The report examines the performance of the programme over the course of Pilot phase, focusing on the Action for Children pilot schemes. Analysis focuses on process issues including the development of the model, implementation as well as examining outcomes and impact of the programme. An outline of the remaining report is provided below.

- Chapter 2: The design of the Parent Champions model and how the link with children's centres aimed to help access to parents.

- Chapter 3: Implementation of the model in practice, assessing national set-up and start-up of local sites, recruitment and management of volunteers, training and Parent Champion engagement with parents.
- Chapter 4: Analysis of key outputs of the project.
- Chapter 5: Analysis of the dynamics of the relationship between Parent Champion and parent and how it contributed to parent outcomes and impact.
- Chapter 6: A review of the learning from the programme.

Data was collected from both Action for Children pilot schemes and National Network schemes. Unless otherwise indicated analysis refers to both Action for Children pilot schemes and National Network schemes.

2 Project design

Chapter 2: Summary

- Various models of Parent Champions had been previously tested leading to the development of best practices and approaches for the Pilot.
- Evaluation of a previous Parent Champion pathfinder project found that schemes based in children's centres were particularly effective.
- Evidence informed the development of a Pilot model where schemes would be linked to children's centres. This approach offered the advantage of an existing organisational hub as well as good access to early years services.

2.1 Prior development of the Parent Champions model

Parent Champions originated as a small scale pilot scheme in three London Boroughs in 2007. Daycare Trust (which merged with the Family and Parenting Institute in 2013 to become Family and Childcare Trust) was commissioned by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families to coordinate six month Parent Champion childcare pilot schemes in Camden, Newham and Tower Hamlets. The original rationale for the project was evidence that suggested that a lack of awareness by parents about available childcare was limiting take-up. Research suggested that parents were confused about available services and unsure of the quality and benefits to their children. Daycare Trust also recognised the value of informal methods of communication in disseminating information to parents. Highlighting the efficacy of 'word of mouth' communication, Daycare Trust reported that parents responded well to "informal channels" adding "the emphatic voice, which speaks directly to the parent, can be a powerful tool when trying to engage and disseminate information."

Drawing on this rationale, Daycare Trust developed a peer-to-peer Parent Champions model where parents would share their experience of using childcare

services to encourage take-up of childcare among other parents and families. The initial phase of the pilot scheme used a local delivery partner to recruit and manage Parent Champions in each area. Parent Champions were paid on a London living wage hourly basis. They were encouraged to talk to parents at the school gate and offer taster sessions at nurseries and other early years settings to encourage take-up.

The activities of Parent Champions during phase 1 of the project demonstrated the effectiveness of parent-to-parent outreach in increasing awareness, particularly among hard to reach communities. The project was further developed in phase 2, 2008 to 2009, with funds being administered by the relevant local authority.

The Daycare Trust pilot led to the publication of a toolkit in 2009 entitled 'Parent Champions for Childcare'. This resource was designed to disseminate good practice and encourage local authorities and delivery agencies to develop Parent Champion schemes.

The Parent Champions model was further tested in a Department for Education funded pathfinder project running from 2011 to 2012. The project tested different delivery approaches and also encouraged schemes to target disadvantaged groups for whom the take-up of early years services was low. The project established schemes in Liverpool, Southwark, Bradford, York, Wiltshire and Sandwell. The disadvantaged groups targeted by schemes included BME families, lone parents, fathers, teenage parents, parents of disabled children and families in rural isolation.

The Department for Education funded pathfinder project provided valuable insight into the effectiveness of different delivery models. Schemes were delivered either by the local authority's Family Information Service (FIS), or by a voluntary organisation or children's centres in the area. Schemes located in children's centres were found to be particularly effective. Parent Champions working from

children's centres benefitted from the knowledge and networks available to them there. For example, they often worked closely with children's centre outreach officers who had access to data on parents who were not accessing children's centre services. The range of services provided by children's centres also offered ready access to parents.

Reports from schemes on the receptiveness of parents to Parent Champions sharing their own parenting experience and knowledge led to an expanded understanding of the Parent Champion role. Parent Champions were now seen as peer advisers to other parents in the community who could share knowledge about early learning as well as signpost to childcare services. Reflecting this expanded role, Parent Champions were taught to talk to parents about the importance of shared activities with their young children and how these could contribute to early learning.

The experience of schemes had also taught that Parent Champions needed proper support to perform their demanding role. Reports from schemes recommended that Parent Champions were trained before they started work and received ongoing support and supervision during their service.

2.3 The children's centre-based Pilot model

Learning gained from previous Parent Champion experience and, in particular, from the pathfinder project, helped to inform the design for the current programme. The success of children's centre-based schemes in the pathfinder project persuaded Family and Childcare Trust it would be worthwhile to make a concerted effort to refine this delivery model. It was therefore decided that the supported schemes proposed for the Pilot would be delivered via children's centres. Parent champions would be managed by a coordinator based at a children's centre giving volunteers access to early years networks and local knowledge about children's services. It was also hoped that the role of the Parent

Champion would complement that of children's centre outreach officers and a mutually supportive relationship would be developed.

To ensure some consistency in the management of local pilots, Family and Childcare Trust decided to opt for a single delivery partner for the six pilot schemes. As a leading provider of children's centres in local authorities Action for Children were chosen as a suitable delivery partner. Action for Children agreed to deliver six schemes in four local authorities, Kirklees, Oldham, Sheffield, Oxfordshire, with Oldham and Oxfordshire with two schemes each. Under the partnership agreement, Action for Children would fill a coordinator post using either an existing staff member based at a children's centre or by recruiting externally. The coordinator would be responsible for the local delivery of the programme, including the recruitment of a minimum of six Parent Champion volunteers per pilot site.

The model for the programme also recognised the need for flexibility and allowed schemes to include local children's service priorities within the delivery model. For example, schemes could encourage signposting to universal children's services in addition to the focus on childcare and early years education. Schemes were also encouraged to target specific disadvantaged groups in Parent Champion outreach work.

A further change to previous practice was the dropping of payment for Parent Champions. In earlier versions of the model schemes had made nominal monthly payments to their Parent Champions in return for their work. However, this had added an administrative burden on schemes, it could adversely affect volunteers' benefits and was felt to have undermined the volunteer ethos of the programme. For the Action for Children Pilot, Family and Childcare Trust decided to make the Parent Champion role wholly voluntary with only expenses claimable.

3 Project implementation

Chapter 3: Summary

- Delays to the programme set-up had a knock-on effect on local implementation.
- Scheme start-up was influenced by local circumstances which in several cases led to delays where unanticipated difficulties were encountered.

3.1 Programme set up

Programme set up was delayed by a number of unanticipated issues. The contract was late in being awarded (April 2013) and this period coincided with the merger of the Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute to become Family and Childcare Trust. The organisational transition delayed appointments of key programme staff. The Project Manager was confirmed in post in May 2013 and the Project Officer was appointed in July 2013. There were also delays in finalising programme staffing at Action for Children, the delivery partner. These staffing issues meant that work on designing a work plan and schedule for implementation did not start in earnest until the summer.

Limited staff capacity at Action for Children also slowed the start-up of the programme. Senior staff took on the responsibility for Parent Champions in addition to their existing role and it was felt that they did not have sufficient dedicated time to give it a strong push. The consultant appointed by Action for Children to manage the scheme nationally was allocated one day a week and this was not considered sufficient to progress implementation effectively. Comments from a staff member involved in the project suggested that it would have been advantageous to have a full-time consultant dedicated to the project in this early period to progress national set-up.

3.2 Action for Children scheme start-up

Schemes faced a number of challenges in getting established. Schemes needed to find a place within the wider operational context of children's centres and often relied on existing staff to become engaged with the project and push it forwards. Staff given responsibility for organising the project often already carried heavy workloads and found it difficult to dedicate sufficient time to the project. The project also relied on 'buy-in' from other children's centre staff to give the project impetus. Some areas experienced a lack of support from senior staff at children's centres.

An additional stumbling block sometimes encountered was resistance from outreach officers who felt the programme posed a threat to their jobs. They expressed a concern that Parent Champion volunteers were duplicating their role by performing outreach for children's centre services. In all these situations Family and Childcare Trust and Action for Children worked closely with local staff to explain the model to help overcome reservations and gain 'buy-in' for the programme.

A further challenge for Action for Children pilot schemes at the start-up stage was getting support from the local authority and local agencies. The work of Parent Champions signposting parents to children's services and information required a close relationship with the local authority and local agencies. This was particularly the case in working with Family Information Services (FIS) which were either run or commissioned by the local authority. As the central information source for children's services in all local authorities, FISs were a key local agency for the project to work with. The project also needed to work closely with voluntary and private agencies to ensure that accurate information and appropriate referrals about local services could be given to parents.

Local authorities were varied in their receptiveness to Parent Champion schemes. Some areas welcomed the prospective effort by Parent Champions to boost the

take-up of childcare services and the new 2 year entitlement in particular. Some local authorities welcomed the volunteering nature of the programme and saw it as a useful way of helping individuals re-enter the labour market. The volunteering aspect also appealed to those who favoured a Big Society vision of community input into the provision of social services. Others were less positive, raising concerns that by publicising the new 2 year offer the project might create a demand for childcare places that could not be met.

Additional difficulties faced by some schemes were structural changes being undertaken at children's centres and in the wider landscape of children's services within local authorities. For some children's centres the programme coincided with major restructuring initiatives that involved changes in roles and staff turnover. This situation invariably led to considerable delays in appointing a coordinator and setting up the scheme. Another factor that contributed to delays was prolonged local authority indecision over children's centre contracts. In Sheffield a commissioning process led to Action for Children children's centres losing their contract to deliver children's centres in the area. As a result Action for Children had to find an alternative agency to host the scheme and ended up using an Action for Children Fostering and Adoption office. These issues delayed start-up considerably and Parent Champions only started working in February 2014.

In Oxfordshire the council undertook a lengthy process of restructuring the provision of children's centres in the county. Faced with this uncertainty, Action for Children staff felt unable to move forward with the programme. With eventual clarification of the situation late in 2013, Oxfordshire began the process of recruiting and training volunteers. By the end of 2013 both Oxfordshire schemes had Parent Champions working.

Compared to wider National Network projects that are able to develop more organically and call on Family and Childcare Trust as and when needed at key stages, often spread over many months, Action for Children had a specific set target of six pilot sites each with six volunteers reaching a specific number of parents, for the six months October 2013 – March 2014. This timetable also meant that any set-up delay also limited evaluation data available by the end of February 2014, for this report.

4 Processes

Chapter 3: Summary

- Scheme start-up was influenced by local circumstances which in several cases led to delays where unanticipated difficulties were encountered.
- Schemes that were led by staff who had experience in volunteer recruitment and management were faster in starting-up than those that did not.
- Strong and innovative leadership from coordinators helped schemes navigate local circumstances and become established.

4.1 Scheme management and staffing

The coordinator was a key driver for the successful implementation and delivery of the scheme. Early appointment of the coordinator was important for progressing start-up of schemes. He or she usually played a decisive role in helping to embed the programme into the local children's services landscape, working to establish relationships and partnerships that facilitated operation. Schemes were better able to become embedded in this way when the coordinator had knowledge of children's services in the area. In Oldham the scheme was led by someone with experience running a similar project in the

area. This person was able to draw on knowledge of children's services in the area to develop partnerships in support of Parent Champions.

Management of a scheme also required effective recruitment and management of volunteers. Coordinators who had experience in this area found it much easier than others to recruit and retain volunteers. In the Kirklees pilot, for example, the scheme coordinator was also the volunteer coordinator for the children's centre. This person could draw on existing networks to recruit and had well established systems in place to support the Parent Champions volunteers once they were in post.

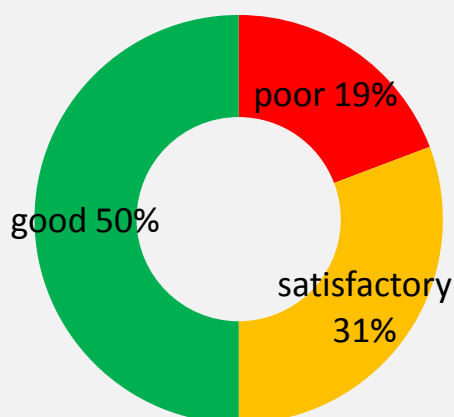
4.2 Volunteer recruitment

Action for Children scheme coordinators managed the supply of volunteers into the programme and their performance on this was heavily influenced their own experience and the networks they could draw on. Coordinators who had experience recruiting and managing volunteers were best equipped to deal with this aspect of the programme and were able to make rapid progress on getting volunteers into the project and ready to start Parent Champion work.

Coordinators from both Action for Children pilot sites and wider National Network schemes reported mixed experiences in recruiting volunteers. Half of coordinators reported that the experience had been 'good', about a third reported 'satisfactory' and a fifth 'poor' (Figure 1²). Comments from coordinators confirmed these mixed experiences suggesting there were clearly some challenges in recruiting for the role but that some schemes had performed well.

² All charts in the report indicate an 'n' number. This figure refers to the number of responses on which the analysis has been based.

Figure 1 - experience of recruiting volunteers for schemes (n=26)



Almost two thirds (63%) of respondents identified difficulties in their comments on the topic. Schemes which reported difficulties said it was a challenge to attract the right calibre of candidate for the role and individuals who expressed interest were sometimes unable to commit to the 5 hours a week required. The expectation to talk to strangers was also mentioned as a factor that discouraged some people.

The expectation to commit 5 hours, the ability to be able to read & write, the expectation to go out and talk to strangers has been off putting to some of our less confident parent/volunteers.

Hard to get people to the level of commitment needed and the right calibre of volunteers are few.

We have found it difficult to recruit volunteers, and even harder to

Significant numbers of schemes, however, reported successes, reflecting the plurality of positive responses recorded in survey responses (Figure 1). A number of schemes, for example, reported that the positions had attracted interest and

I have been very fortunate to have successfully recruited a number of highly experienced parents who have gone on to become Parent Champions.

Our school parent support advisers were key in promoting this opportunity and we had a good response level.

recruitment had gone well.

The different experiences of schemes were largely attributable to the personal experience of the coordinator and the networks available to them. Where coordinators were able to draw on experience in volunteer recruitment and networks they were able to attract suitable candidates for the position. For example, schemes based in children's centres that already had volunteers working

there found it straightforward to recruit suitable candidates. Other schemes used contacts with schools or voluntary organisations to find volunteers. The overall impression was that although the role wasn't right for everyone interested in volunteering it was attractive to sufficient numbers to fill the posts.

Parent Champions themselves provided detailed insight into what it was about the role that they had found attractive. A large proportion liked the fact that the role involved being active in the community and helping other parents and families to become more involved. They were genuinely enthusiastic about helping other parents and saw the role as contributing to a stronger and more cohesive local community.

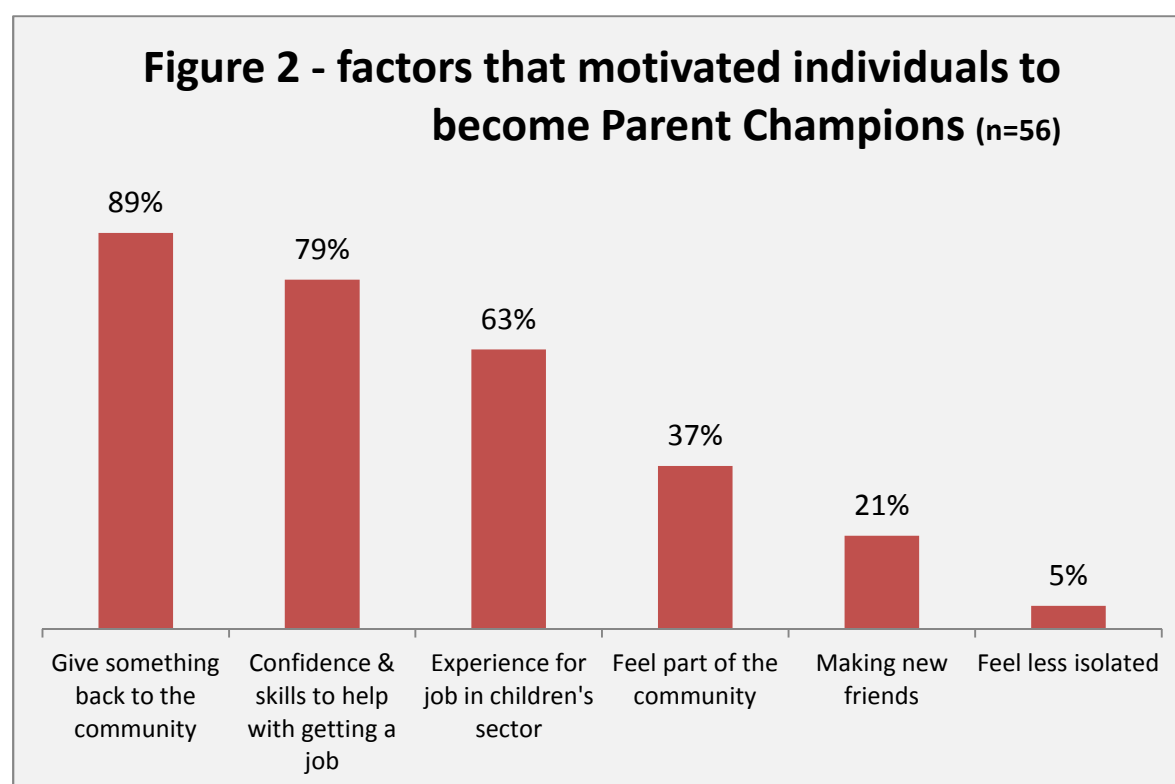
This sentiment was apparent in survey responses on what motivated them to become a Parent Champions. They reported a strong interest in making a contribution to the community. About nine out of 10 volunteers (89%) identified 'wanting to give something back to the community' as a motivating factor (Figure 2) and half of respondents identified it as the most important factor among a list of six. This was the most strongly felt factor identified with almost two thirds (63%) of Parent Champions identifying it as among their top three most important factors.

Making a contribution to the community was not the only factor generally identified by volunteers. Most volunteers also identified employment opportunities as a significant motivating factor. As Figure 2 illustrates, a significant majority of Parent Champions reported they had been motivated to 'gain confidence and skills to help with getting a job' (79%) and gain 'experience to get a job in the children's sector' (63%).

These responses pointed to two distinct themes that were apparent in interviews with Parent Champions. A large number of volunteers had applied for the post after long periods of not working while looking after young children. Usually mothers, these were women who often did not have extensive previous work

experience but were keen to gain skills and experience that could lead to work in the future. These women had limited work skills and were often lacking in self-confidence. However, they saw Parent Champions as a unique opportunity to gain work experience while sharing with others their local knowledge. They felt confident they could perform the role because of their experience as local mums. But they were grateful for the opportunity because it offered valuable work experience.

A further group of mothers with somewhat more work experience had taken on the role not as a way of generally re-entering the world of work but to gain specific experience for a job in the children's sector. For example, some applicants were interested in getting a job as a family support worker and saw the Parent Champion role as a means of gaining related work experience. This group of women had a defined goal and a clear strategy for achieving it.



4.1 Volunteer training

Family and Childcare Trust offered a 2 day training course to the pilot schemes and National Network schemes starting up. The training was delivered on-site at the scheme by Family and Childcare Trust programme staff or consultants who had experience supporting Parent Champions schemes.³

The training course offered an overview of the role of a Parent Champion and a discussion of the limited awareness of childcare services that the programme sought to address. The course also covered understanding childcare services and the options that Parent Champions would be directing parents to as well as health and safety guidance on contact with parents. Some areas added their own modules to the course schedule where they wanted volunteers to understand particular local targets and objectives for the scheme.

The aims and objective defined by the training were the following:

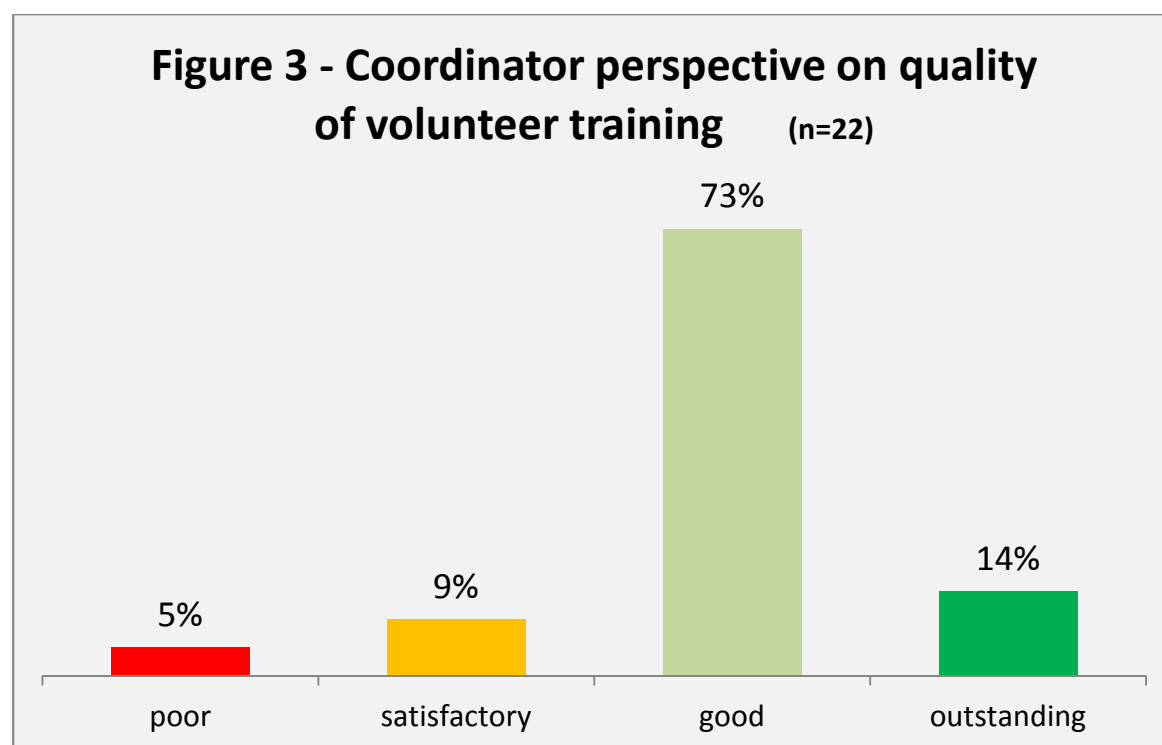
- Explaining the role of a Parent Champion and how he/she works.
- Understanding the role of FIS and other organisations involved in the project.
- Identifying different techniques for engaging with parents.
- Understanding the importance of good communication and being able to interpret non-verbal communication.
- Learning about the health and personal safety issues in the context of Parent Champion work.

Volunteers reported that the training had been informative and had supported them in their role. Coordinators, who usually attended the training alongside

³ Action for Children pilot schemes were also offered an additional 'Welcome to Action for Children' training that covered safeguarding, health and safety, boundaries and confidentiality.

volunteers, were positive in their assessment of the training. Nearly nine out of 10 coordinators (87%) evaluated the training either as 'good' or 'outstanding' (Figure 3).

Comments from coordinators suggested the training was thorough and paid useful attention to how delegates should use their existing knowledge and advised on techniques on talking to parents. One coordinator commented that the trainer "was exceptionally good at making the parents think about the programme in relation to what they already do and how to best offer information informally to parents".



4.2 Managing volunteers and safety procedures

Previous Parent Champion experience had highlighted the importance of managing volunteers appropriately. In approaching and talking to parents, Parent Champions were taking on a demanding task without previous experience. The

role required that Parent Champions understood the boundaries for interaction with parents and acted in a manner that was respectful and safe for both parties.

The demanding nature of the role also required that schemes provided ongoing support and supervision for Parent Champions. This was important not only from a safety perspective but also in terms of ensuring the quality of the service offered by Parent Champions. Volunteers were likely to develop in the role and encounter a range of situations in their work. Family and Childcare Trust recognised it was important that they had regular opportunity to review their work practices through supervision.

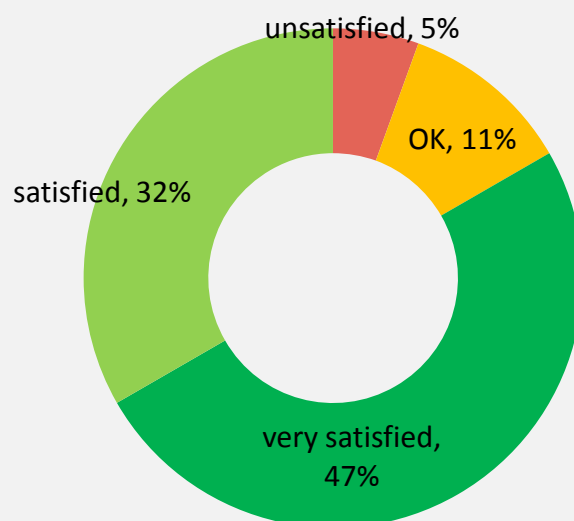
The programme provided appropriate support and systems to help schemes manage volunteers. Coordinators from both pilot and National Network schemes were offered a 'Managing Volunteers' training course prior to starting a scheme which provided detailed guidance on recruitment, day to day management and supervision. Parent champion support was also featured prominently in support materials, e.g. Parent Champions Toolkit, and in the volunteer training.

The recommended format for support in the programme was weekly telephone catch-ups and monthly in-person supervision meetings. The catch-up conversations would allow a volunteer to share any pressing issues and give a brief overview of their recent activities to their supervisor. Monthly supervision meetings could be undertaken on an individual basis or as a group session and provided an opportunity to discuss concerns in detail and undertake professional development on relevant issues. Schemes that held group supervision meetings were also asked to offer one-to-one meetings with volunteers if requested.

Reports from volunteers were that the support systems used by schemes had proved effective. Schemes had implemented the model of supervisor support and, in many cases, had facilitated more extensive communication between staff and volunteers. For example, volunteers reported that they felt that staff were always available to answer questions and give advice on the phone or by email.

Reflecting this general satisfaction, almost eight out of 10 volunteers reported they were either satisfied (32%) or 'very satisfied' (47%) with the support provided for the role (Figure 4). Only 5% of volunteers indicated they were 'unsatisfied' with the support.

Figure 4 - satisfaction of volunteers with support provided n=20



We have ongoing support, email connection and regular check in meetings to see how things are going. The Parent Champions and co-ordinators have open access to communicate with each other

We have regular meetings to keep in touch with the rest of the team. Our staff are always on the end of the phone to help with any problems we might face.

I have felt supported and valued as I have settled into the role. I feel I have access to that support when I need it.

The supervisor for our area is great, always available if you need help

4.3 Experience of working as Parent Champion

Gaining confidence in the role

Parent champions often experienced a learning curve in progressing from training to working in the role. Although the preparation they had received was felt to be valuable Parent Champions were often unsure what to expect and uncertain whether they had the personal qualities to perform the role. Many volunteers starting out were wary of the challenge of approaching strangers. Initial nervousness was quickly overcome, however, once they actually began engaging with parents.

Equipped with a clear sense of the objective in approaching parents, volunteers quickly gained confidence. By using simple conversation techniques to engage with parents, volunteers came to recognise the importance of building trust and

showing empathy. Just as in a regular conversation between two individuals in the community, a person would open up when they felt the other person was sympathetic to their situation and needs.

Parent champions became comfortable about building trust in this way because they genuinely felt that the parent would benefit from the information they had to offer. As a fellow parent they could relate to many of the challenges parents raised with them in conversation. But with knowledge about services in the community they were in a position also to point them towards services and activities that could potentially improve their situation. For example, a Parent Champion could readily empathise with a mother who was getting overwhelmed with childcare responsibilities. In addition to empathy, however, a Parent Champion could suggest the parent used a local playgroup or claimed the 2 year old nursery place offer. Equipped with this natural empathy and knowledge of practical solutions, Parent Champions often grew into the role and performed it with confidence.

Locations used to meet parents – picking the lower lying fruit

With the Action for Children pilot schemes based in children's centres, Parent Champions tended to link their work closely with activities and services offered in the centre. This was productive for Parent Champions because it provided a readily available network that parents could be reached at and also directed to. For example, parents using a play session for toddlers at the children's centre could be signposted to a family support service at the same centre. However, the disadvantage of using this approach was that Parent Champions would only reach those parents who were already attending the children's centre. Parents who were not engaged with the children's centre would not be contacted by Parent Champions.

Comparison of the locations where Parent Champions met with parents showed distinctive patterns between the Action for Children pilot schemes and National

Network schemes. For the pilot schemes based in children's centres Parent Champions were much more likely to meet parents in this location. For pilot schemes 39% of meetings with parents took place in children's centres compared to 21% in Network schemes. Parent Champions meetings in children's centres in pilot schemes were much more common than meetings in any other location with the closest being at a 'Stall at event' 19% and at 'School' 13% (Figure 5).

Network schemes, which were not exclusively based in children's centres, showed Parent Champions working across a range of locations and with much less dependence on children's centres.⁴ The most common location reported was 'community groups and places of worship' at 32%, followed by 'Other' locations at 21% and children's centres at 21% (Figure 6).⁵

These differences between pilot schemes and Network schemes suggest some important differences in patterns of working for Parent Champions. Parent Champions in the pilot children's centre-based schemes were more likely to meet parents in this children's service setting than in more 'neutral' settings in the community. In pilot schemes 43% of parent contacts were made in community settings (stall, 'out and about', school or community group or place of worship) compared to about half (53%) for Network schemes.

The data on the locations where parents were met also suggested Parent Champions in pilot schemes favoured more 'structured' environments to meet parents (children's centres, schools, libraries, stalls and community groups) rather than venturing into the 'open' community (playgrounds and 'out and about') or 'doorstepping' parents at home. A large majority (86%) of parent meetings took

⁴ Among the six Network schemes that submitted data, three were based at the FIS, 2 in children's centres and 1 at a Home Start centre.

⁵ 'Other' locations included colleges and contact made via telephone.

place in these 'structured' locations compared to about two thirds (69%) in Network schemes.

This pattern of favouring working in children's centres and 'structured' settings suggests Parent Champions in pilot schemes were less likely to reach parents who were not engaged with services. It is not clear whether this pattern of working was a result of the initiative of Parent Champions themselves, choosing to work close at hand, or a result of practice suggested by coordinators. In either case it represents a missed opportunity to engage with more disadvantaged parents and is likely to have lessened the impact of the pilot schemes on this target group. For both pilot schemes and Network schemes the incidence of engagement with parents in unstructured community settings (at the parent's home, playgrounds or 'out and about') was very low (8% in pilot schemes, 5% in Network schemes). This type of community-focused outreach is an area of Parent Champion work that could be significantly developed to ensure that target populations are being reached.

Figure 5 Pilot schemes - locations where parents were met n=97

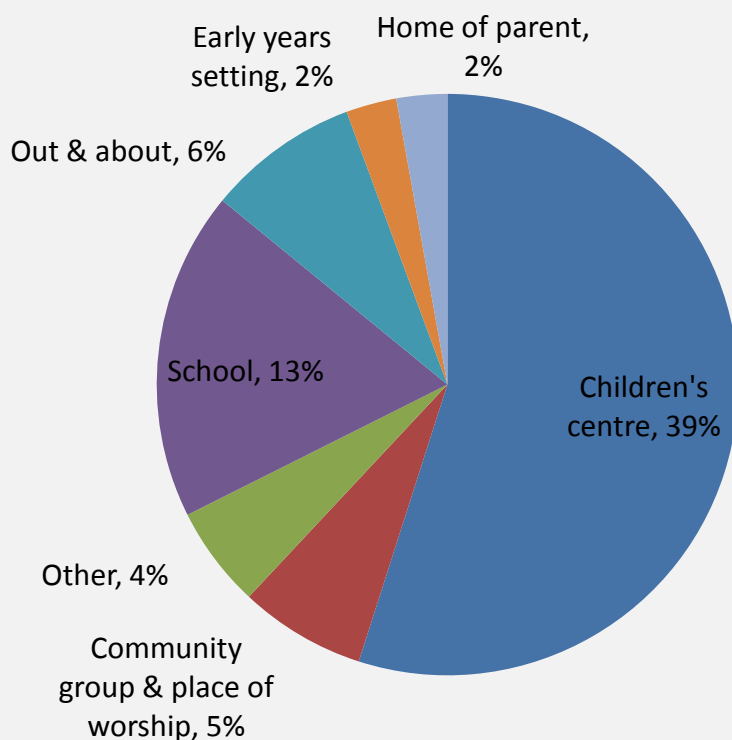
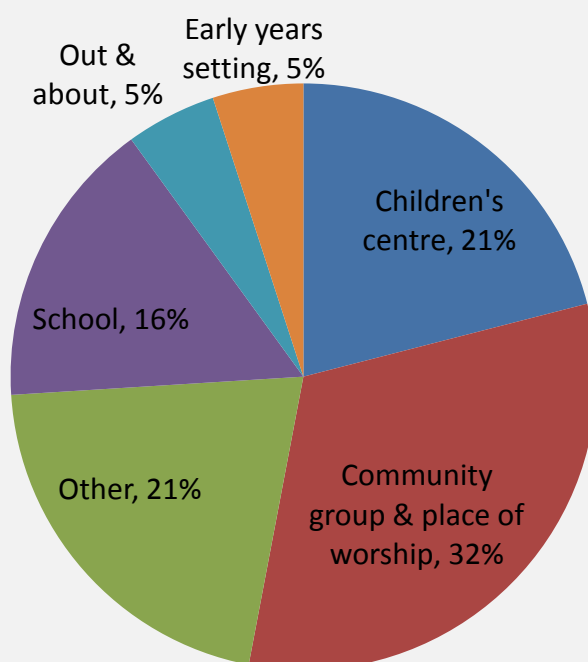


Figure 6 National Network schemes - locations where parents were met n=52



Building trust and developing relationships with parents

It was not uncommon for Parent Champions to develop an ongoing relationship with parents they approached. An initial conversation would open up the possibility of further contact if Parent Champion and parent met up again. At a subsequent meeting between the two a more extensive conversation might take place. For example, the parent might initiate the conversation by asking the Parent Champion for more details on something that had been mentioned previously. An ongoing friendly relationship might ensue involving casual conversation as well as involving the parent asking for information and advice as the need arose.

This pattern of a slowly building relationship between Parent Champion and parent with subsequent meetings leading to more detailed exchanges underlines the importance of developing trust in the relationship. This dynamic was particularly relevant for 'unengaged' parents not using children's services and outside of parent-based social networks in the community. These more isolated parents often did not engage in lengthy conversations with Parent Champions at the initial contact but would be open to further conversation if a degree of trust had been established. As a fellow parent and a recognised 'face' in the community, a Parent Champion was uniquely positioned to develop the kind of relationship in which informal advice and information could be shared to these 'hard to reach' parents.

5 Outputs

Chapter 5: Summary

- 45 volunteers were trained at Action for Children pilot sites. 100 volunteers were trained in National Network schemes.
- 144 parent contacts made by Parent Champions with 166 referrals and 291 cases of information given .*
- Over 2,000 parents talked to in groups by Parent Champions.*
- 34 schemes supported through the National Network with 15 projects active with working Parent Champions. A further 38 local authorities expressed interest and were sent information.

*Figures calculated from data submitted by March 31 2014. Not all schemes submitted data.

87% of scheme data was from pilot schemes, 13% from National Network schemes.

Quantitative findings refer to Parent Champions schemes in general unless otherwise indicated.

5.1 Volunteers trained and working as Parent Champions

A total of 45 volunteers in the pilot schemes completed training, 36 of which went to become active Parent Champions. This represented an 80% retention rate which compares favourably to other volunteer-led family support programmes.⁶

Schemes experienced some turnover in numbers once volunteers became active as Parent Champions. Some volunteers left the post as their situation changed. Schemes reported that a number of volunteers left because they had found work. Because of this ongoing flux coordinators usually treated the recruitment, training and supervision of working Parent Champions as an ongoing process. In this way

⁶ For example, Family Lives' 'Instructions Not Included' befriending project experienced a 70% retention rate between volunteers completing training and starting work.

schemes were diligent about ensuring that new volunteers were always coming through the pipeline to ensure that the numbers of Parent Champions was at least kept constant.

5.2 Parent Champion contact with parents

Data recorded 144 parent contacts made by Parent Champions with 166 referrals and 291 cases of information given. One-to-one meetings with parents therefore led to an average of one (1.1) referral and two (2.0) points of information given to each parent.

In addition to one to one meetings Parent Champions also made contact with parents at group meetings and at special activities, e.g. by running a stall at a supermarket. Schemes reported that Parent Champions had made contact with 2,100 parents in group meetings and had run 109 special activities.

Type of referrals given to parents

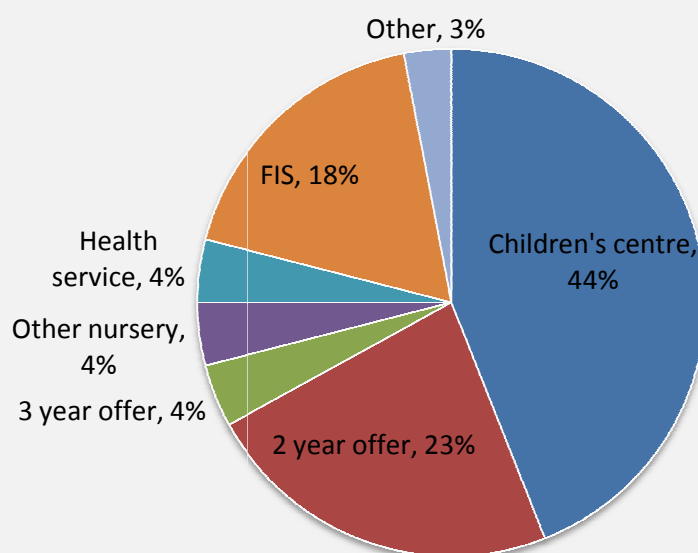
A key objective of the programme was that Parent Champions signpost parents to childcare services available in their area and encourage take-up of the new 2 year and the existing 3 and 4 year old nursery place offer. Figure 7 and 8 illustrate the extent to which referrals given to parents in pilot and National Network schemes covered a range of key early years services. For both types of scheme referrals to services or activities at a children's centre were the most common accounted for 44% in pilot schemes and 31% in National Network schemes. Referrals to FIS, a key component of the Parent Champion model, were also high, accounting for about a third (31%) in National Network schemes and about a fifth in pilot schemes (19%).

A notable highlight of the data, however, was the high proportion of referrals for the 2 year nursery offer. Given that this was a new offer and family awareness of

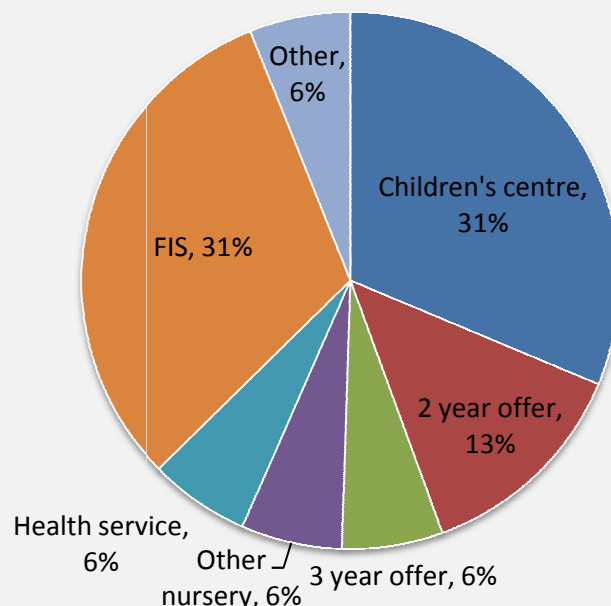
it was relatively low, the programme had made this a key target for Parent Champion outreach to parents. For pilot schemes referrals for the 2 year offer represented 23% of the total and for National Network schemes 13%. The higher proportion in pilot schemes suggested that it had been made a priority in Parent Champion work and that Parent Champions had taken this commitment seriously and were working to ensure eligible parents claimed their entitlement.

Figure 7 Pilot schemes - referral given to parents at meeting

n=143



**Figure 8 National Network schemes - referral
given to parents at meeting** n=23

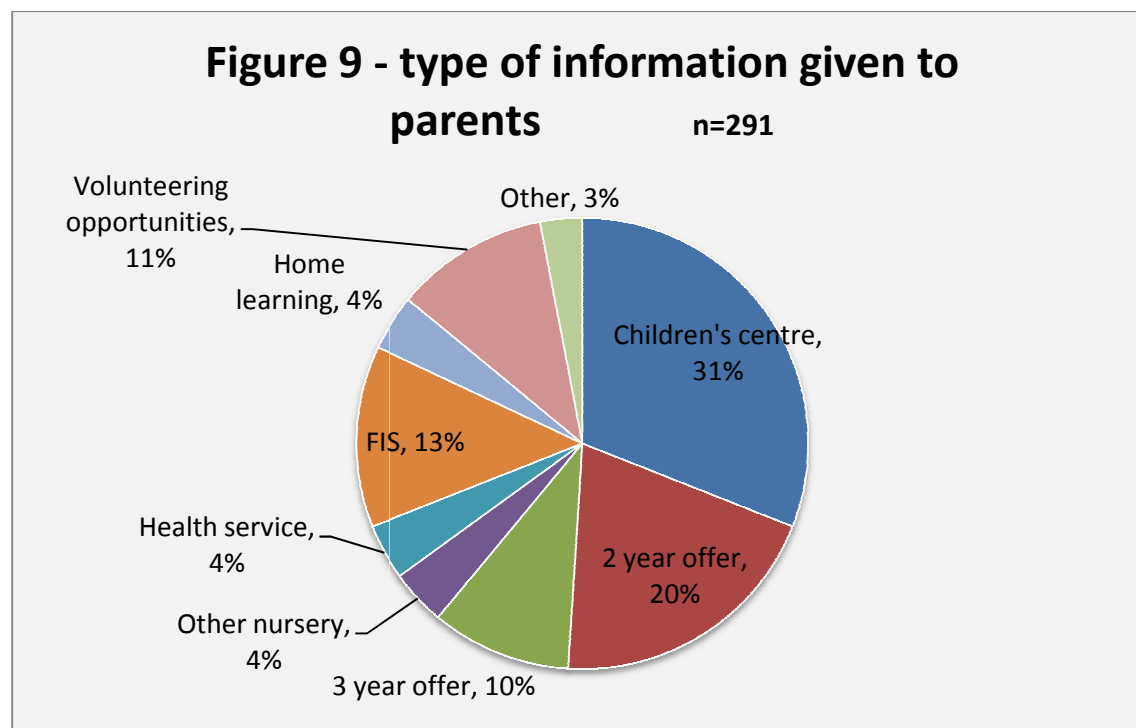


Type of information given to parents

Interestingly, more pieces of information were given to parents than referrals; on average, for every referral made, two pieces of information were given. This corresponds to what you would expect of an informal conversation between parents. For example, in a typical conversation a Parent Champion would share a number of pieces of general information but would make one specific recommendation or 'referral'. The data suggested that compared to referrals this 'general' information was less likely to be about a children's centre (down from 45% to 31%) and more likely to include issues of wider interest to young children, e.g. home learning (up from none to 4%), and non-service issues, e.g. volunteering opportunities (11%) (Figure 9).

Comparing this data from pilot and Network schemes showed similar differences observed on referrals. Parent Champions working in pilot schemes were more likely to give information about children's centres (30%) than those working in National Network schemes (21%). Similarly, pilot Parent Champions were more

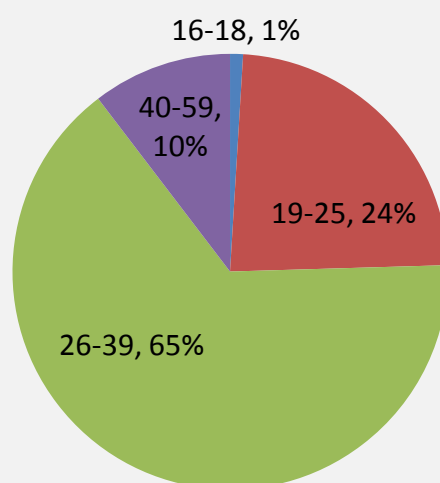
likely to provide information on the 2 year offer (20%) than those working in National Network schemes (9%).



Social profile of parents met

The social profiles of parents met by Parent Champions were broadly similar across pilot and National Network schemes. Parents were mostly female (92% female, 8% male) and covered a range of ages but were largely between 26 and 39 (65%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10 - ages of parents met by Parent Champions n=106



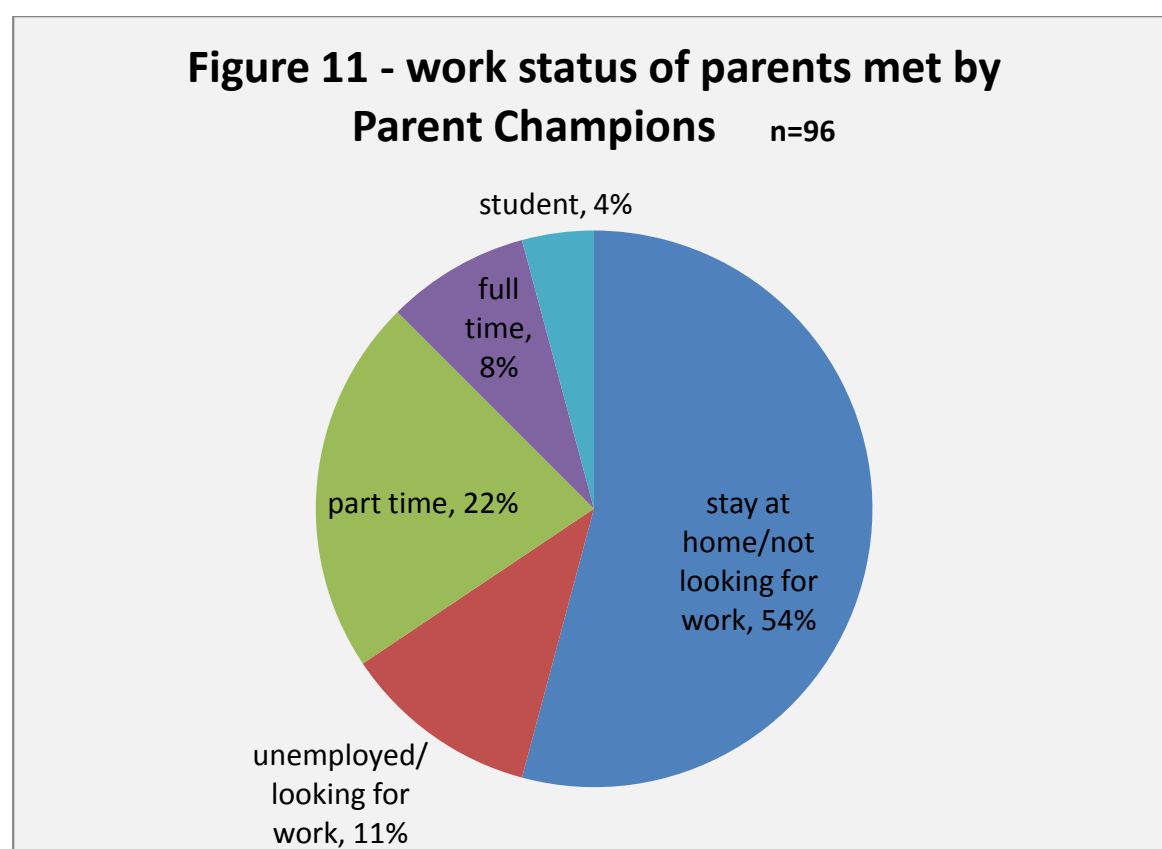
Parents also varied by family type. A minority were lone parents (13%). This proportion was lower than the 26% of families with dependent children headed by lone parents in England and Wales (ONS, 2011). Less than one in 10 (7%) reported they were in receipt of housing benefit. Of parents who gave responses only very small numbers reported having a child with disability (2%) or reported a parent in their household had a disability (1%).

The family size reported by parents was almost all (97%) under three children with 69% reporting only one child. Only 3% reported large families of more than 2 children. This figure was substantially lower than the 14% incidence among families with dependent children in England and Wales⁷. The high proportion of small families contacted is likely to reflect the fact that Parent Champions were targeting parents with young children. Parents with young children are more likely to have only one child than parents with older children.

⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/family-size/2012/family-size-rpt.html>

Language spoken at home was used as a proxy for the ethnicity of parents. A large majority of families spoke English (78%). About a fifth of respondents (22%) indicated a non-English home language, including Urdu (9%), Punjabi (6%), and Polish (4%).

Data received from parents about their work status indicated a range of working and non-working circumstances (Figure 11). A majority of parents were home based and not looking for work (54%), about a third (30%) were in employment, and one in 10 (11%) were unemployed and looking for work.

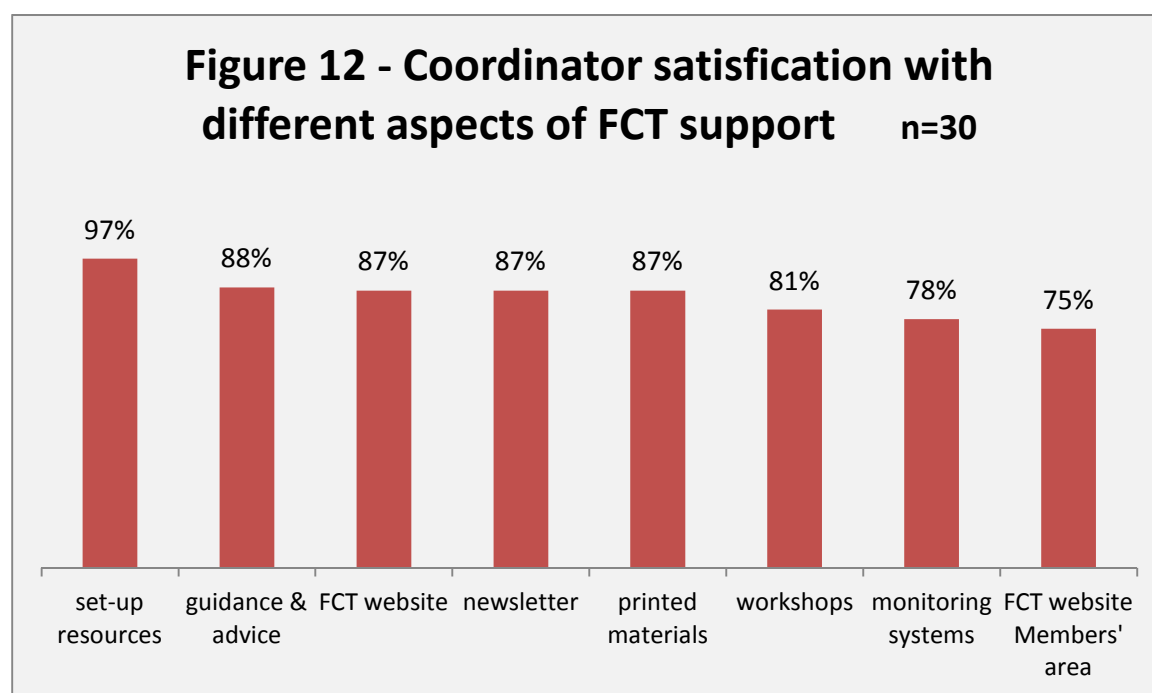


5.3 Ongoing scheme support from Family and Childcare Trust

Family and Childcare Trust offered a range of support for schemes in addition to Parent Champion and coordinator training. In addition to printed and web-based resources, Family and Childcare Trust offered workshops for coordinators, 'Managing Volunteers' and 'Monitoring and demonstrating impact', on-site

advisory support, scheme set-up and innovation grants, and a Parent Champion newsletter. Family and Childcare Trust also held a Parent Champions national conference in March 2014. These resources and activities were intended to promote collaboration and learning across schemes, disseminate best practice and provide support to starting and developing schemes.

Feedback from schemes was resoundingly positive about the support provided by Family and Childcare Trust. Nearly nine out of 10 (88%) coordinators rated the support as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Coordinators consistently rated highly individual aspects of support, with particularly high assessment of 'set-up resources' at 97% (Figure 12).



I feel that they have provided excellent support and mentoring tools, and good networking opportunities for Parent Champions co ordinators.

Friendly, professional, fast to respond. excellent training and support

[The Family and Childcare Trust staff] have been very enthusiastic and helpful throughout the process of setting up and maintaining the Parent Champion project within Action for Children Kirklees cluster. The communication and support has been excellent

I have found the advice from Family and Childcare Trust to be invaluable. As someone new to project work it has given me a starting point and enabled me to think how best to introduce the scheme into the area where I work.

Family and Childcare Trust are patient and assist with problem solving in order to support the development and implementation of the Parent Champion schemes. Where some projects feel restrictive and barriers are presented, we have not experienced this which is refreshing

Coordinators

6 Outcomes and impact

Chapter 6: Summary

- 57% of referrals made by Parent Champion were used by parents and 43% led to regular use of the service.*
- Most parents responded well to the contact made by a Parent Champion and welcomed the peer advice offered.
- Volunteers reported significant gains in communication skills and self-confidence as a result of their involvement.

*Figures calculated from data submitted by March 31 2014. Not all schemes submitted data. 87% of data on one to one parent meetings were from pilot schemes, 13% from National Network schemes. Findings on impact were broadly similar between pilot schemes and National Network schemes. Quantitative findings refer to Parent Champions schemes in general but are particularly representative of the performance of pilot schemes.

6.1 Parent outcomes

A key indicator of the efficacy of Parent Champion's work was whether the contact with parents led to any action or changed behaviour. To demonstrate that the conversations had value it was vitally important to show that they were leading to parents taking action; that referrals to services were being followed-up on and that advice given was being used. Previous Parent Champions programmes had not monitored actions taken by parents after contact with Parent Champion. This evaluation saw data on this aspect of performance collected and analysed for the first time.

Conversion of referrals to use of service

One of the key outcome metrics for the programme was analysis of the use of referrals by parents. Using data from the point of contact and by talking to the parent a month later we were able to assess whether any referrals given had

been used, and, if so, whether the referral had led to regular use. In this way we could differentiate between the following different scenarios after a contact was made:

- No subsequent action taken by parent – e.g. the referral or information/advice was not used.
- Parent made a visit to the service or try-out of activity but no habitual action.
- Parent made a visit to the service or try-out of activity leading to habitual action.

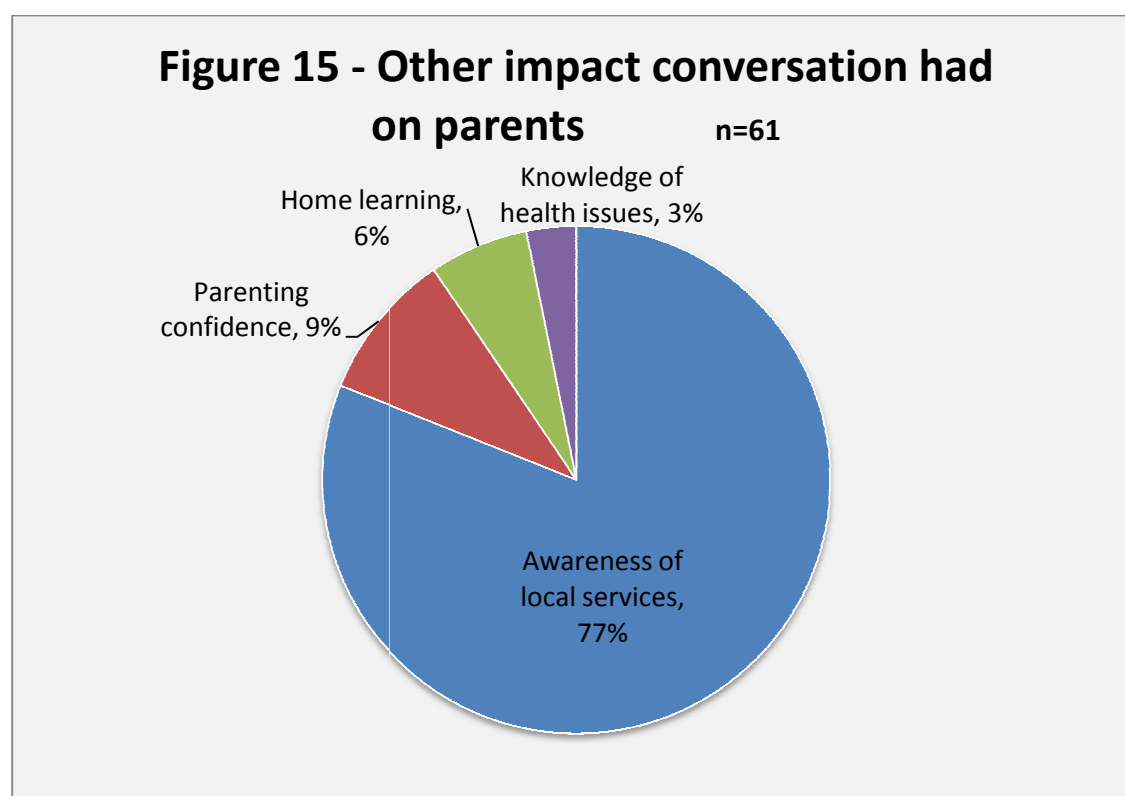
Analysis of the data collected suggested a relatively strong conversion rate of referrals to use of the service. Of the 166 referrals made to parents 57% were used and 43% led to regular use of the service recommended (Figure 13, 14).

6.2 Other impact made on parents

Parents at the follow-up call were also asked to assess whether they had been impacted in general ways as a result of the meeting with the Parent Champion. They were allowed to choose from 'awareness of local services', 'parenting confidence' 'home learning' and 'knowledge of health issues'. They were also offered an 'other' option which they were asked to specify.

Like referrals, mention of these 'Other impact' factors showed a healthy conversion rate from parent contacts. From the 144 contacts recorded, 44% led to mention of an 'Other impact'. Of the impacts selected, perhaps not surprisingly, a large majority (77%) were an 'awareness of local services' (Figure 15). Other factors were less commonly mentioned. 'Parenting confidence', however, registered at 9%. This was surprisingly high given that it was not a stated objective for Parent Champion conversations with parents. The fact that a number of parents mentioned it as an outcome suggests the emotionally

supportive character of these interactions. Parent champion conversations may have helped boost parent's confidence simply as a result of talking about a family issue in a supportive atmosphere. For example, on hearing about a mother's difficulty dealing with tantrums from a 2 year old a Parent Champion may have spoken about how she had addressed the same problem. Hearing an account of how challenging the situation had been but how it had been successfully resolved may have helped the parent believe they could deal with the issue themselves. This type of support from Parent Champions encouraging parents to believe that they can deal with situations is likely to lead to improved parenting confidence.



6.3 Volunteer outcomes

With volunteers so integral to the Parent Champion delivery model it was important for the programme that the volunteering experience was a positive one. The Parent Champion model suggested that working as a Parent Champion should be a rewarding experience providing the volunteer with an opportunity to

gain skills, experience and engage with the local community. Family and Childcare Trust took this responsibility seriously providing a range of resources including training for volunteers and training and guidance to schemes on how they should manage volunteers. In many cases schemes offered additional training to volunteers in areas related to their work such as safeguarding and child protection.

Feedback from the pilot and National Network schemes indicated that some volunteers had used their experience with Parent Champions as a stepping-stone to gain employment. This mostly applied to those volunteers who had joined the programme with the intention of gaining relevant experience for a job in the children's services sector. For about a third of volunteers this consideration had been the most important factor in becoming involved. But for half of volunteers the desire to 'give something back to the community' had been the most important factor. And this factor was usually most influential in volunteer's assessment of their experience. For many Parent Champions involvement in the project was an empowering experience that had given them sense of personal efficacy and sense of contributing to the community. It was often this sentiment rather than any pragmatic consideration that gave them a sense of satisfaction about the role.

Parent champions earned genuine satisfaction from their work. Sharing their knowledge with others and helping fellow parents improve their situation gave them a sense of pride and responsibility. A strong sense of personal achievement was apparent in reflections about the biggest

"To see new faces coming through the doors of the [children's] centres and getting praise from the local groups to say that they are over-run with new people and to know that it's our doing makes you feel so proud to be part of a brilliant team."

Being a Parent Champion "is confidence building...the more parents we have involved more parents in the community can be reached and lives impacted in a positive way."

Parent champions

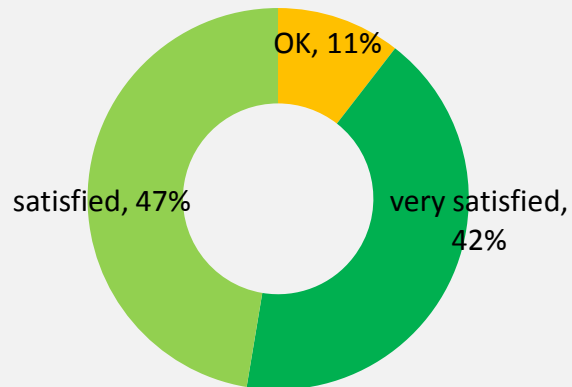
challenge they had faced as a Parent Champion. Many volunteers mentioned overcoming shyness to talk to parents. As one volunteer commented; "to actually approach parents is a big step for me as I am quite a shy person. But with the support I have received I have totally overcome this."

The sense of personal efficacy in helping parents was apparent in comments about the biggest achievement experienced as a Parent Champion. As one volunteer commented, "it is great to feel you have helped someone by signposting them somewhere to help with their problems".

Survey responses from volunteers echoed these positive sentiments. A large majority of respondents (89%) said that they were satisfied with volunteering as a Parent Champion (Figure 16). Volunteers were also strongly positive when considering whether they would recommend becoming a Parent Champion to a friend with almost nine out of 10 (89%) volunteers said they would.

Feedback from volunteers indicated in many cases the role had been a challenging experience from which they had gained personal skills. Strong gains in self-esteem and confidence were commonly reported. Volunteers spoke of going into the role unconfident in their abilities and nervous about speaking in public. They had thrived in the responsibility of working as a Parent Champion and felt they made a positive contribution to the community in their work.

**Figure 16 - satisfaction of volunteers working
as Parent Champion** n=19



7 Best practice and learning

Chapter 7: Summary

- Children's centres offered a valuable organisational resource for schemes but had the effect of discouraging outreach to less engaged parents.
- The high take-up of services by parents after meeting with Parent Champions was attributable to the empathetic character of conversations.
- A key challenge in Parent Champion work was reaching parents not engaged with services. Parent champions needed to make special effort to make contact with these parents to ensure their work reached those families most likely to benefit.
- Volunteer Parent Champions widely enjoyed the experience and reported considerable gains in self-confidence and employability.

7.1 Reflections on the Parent Champions model

Efficacy of peer-based model of communicating to parents

Building on previous Parent Champions work the programme offered further evidence of the effectiveness of the peer-to-peer based Parent Champions model. In both children's centre-based pilot schemes and National Network schemes, Parent Champions proved effective in communicating to parents and encouraging take-up of local services. The high rate of conversion of referrals given to referrals used by parents suggested the efficacy of the peer-based model of communicating with parents. In just over half of cases the referral given by the Parent Champion was used by the parent. For slightly under half, the service recommended became regularly used by the parent. And, also for slightly under half, the parent reported an additional impact as a result of the Parent Champion meeting, e.g. an awareness of local services.

Underlying this willingness of parents to take action after contact with a Parent Champion was the unique character of the relationship with parents. Parents reacted positively to the emotionally supportive character of interactions with Parent Champions. They were receptive to the informal approach by a fellow parent and warmed to the genuine enthusiasm communicated by the Parent Champion. They responded positively to the fact that this person was someone like them and was going through the same challenges they were. In this way, Parent Champions naturally offered empathy and support in their conversations and parents felt able to open up and share issues with them. Within this trusting environment created by Parent Champions, parents were able to listen to advice and take on new ideas and suggestions in a way that may not have occurred had the parent received the same information through other channels.

Impact on parenting confidence

The emotionally supportive character of Parent Champion interactions was also found to be important in improving parenting confidence. This is an outcome that has not received attention in the past but is nonetheless an important by-product of the informal peer support offered by Parent Champions. Conversations with parents were often supportive in tone and sometimes involved the Parent Champion sharing their own experience of a particular issue or problem. Hearing an account from a fellow parent about how challenging a particular situation had been for them and how they had successfully resolved it may help boost confidence and encourage parents that they can deal with difficult situations. It may be useful in future Parent Champion work to acknowledge parenting confidence as an intended outcome and provide support to Parent Champions to develop this area of their work.

Developing relationships with parents

Evidence from across schemes suggested that Parent Champions interacted with parents in a number of ways. As would be expected from a community and peer-based model, Parent Champions would sometimes have further conversations with a parent after an initial meeting. A Parent Champion and a parent would come across each other somewhere in the community and engage in further conversation. An ongoing friendly relationship might ensue involving casual conversation as well as sharing information and advice as the need arises. Through this experience Parent Champions came to recognise the value of these slow building relationships where initial contact leads to progressively more engaged conversations and increased receptiveness to taking advice. The programme would benefit from acknowledging the value of relationship-building and could provide relevant support to Parent Champions. Furthermore, this area of work may have particular efficacy in reaching 'unengaged' parents outside of parent-based social networks in the community who may need to develop trust before they open up to a Parent Champion.

7.2 Reflections on the children's centre-based model

Children's centre location presented benefits and risks

The six Action for Children pilot schemes provided a rich source of evidence regarding the location of schemes in children's centres. While locating a scheme in children's centres offered significant benefits it also presented some risks in reaching less engaged parents. Parent Champions working in the pilot schemes disproportionately tended to make contact with parents in the children's centre they were based in.

Children's centres offered a valuable organisational resource for schemes that ensured that relevant resources and expertise were close at hand. Parent Champions benefitted from professional expertise and support which helped

them better understand local children's services and gave them tools to perform effective outreach.

Parent champions also often took advantage of the close proximity of services and activities run in children's centres to make contact with parents. Two fifths of contacts (39%) made with parents were made in children's centres. With parents attending a range of different activities at a centre it made sense for much Parent Champions work to be undertaken there. While this strategy made sense in terms of ease of working it is likely to have hindered the ability of the programme to reach unengaged parents. The high proportion of work in children's centres may explain the relatively low proportion of parents classified as disadvantaged met by Parent Champions: 7% receiving housing benefit, 11% lone parents and 1% parents of 16 – 18 years of age. Schemes should be sensitive to this issue and encourage Parent Champions to work in 'unstructured' settings such as playgrounds or parks where these parents are more likely to be accessed.

Strong leadership helped overcome local barriers

The programme also provided learning on local operation of Parent Champion schemes. As a programme that required close collaboration and partnership between agencies schemes were acutely sensitive to local circumstances. Schemes had to locate themselves within an often changing and uncertain landscape of children's services within a local authority. On occasion schemes were at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control such as commissioning decisions about children's services. Sometimes schemes encountered barriers arising from misunderstandings about the programme. In most cases the scheme could be moved forward with effective and strong leadership from the coordinator and where there was 'buy-in' from senior local staff. The Pilot provided a number of examples of coordinators using creative thinking and innovative approaches to overcome difficulties and successfully set up a scheme.

Potential for scale-up of the children's centre-based Parent Champions model

Overall, the strong performance of the children's centre model suggested distinct advantages over alternatives. Although the experience of the Action for Children pilot schemes was not without challenges none of the issues encountered could be considered insurmountable. The most pressing of these issues was the tendency for Parent Champions to meet parents within the children's centre. With appropriate guidance from Family and Childcare Trust schemes could adopt a more strategic approach to where Parent Champions meet with parents and encourage them to work in more 'unstructured' settings.

On the other hand, the benefits of being based in a children's centre are significant. Parent Champions schemes can act as a complement to the work of children's centres by supporting outreach and encouraging the use of activities. Parent Champions benefit greatly from the infrastructure available and the expertise on children's services. When managed well the relationship between a Parent Champion scheme and a children's centre can achieve a synergy that benefits both parties.