

# Community Learning Reform

Support and Resources for Providers

**Training parents of children with special needs to support other parents of children with special needs**

**West Berkshire Council**

## **Introduction**

This case study describes a project funded by West Berkshire Council's Community Education Fund which aims to support local organisations to deliver community learning to targeted groups. The project was developed in partnership with two other organisations to train parents of children with special needs as peer mentors. The project has increased the reach of Community Learning in West Berkshire and benefited participants as well as training volunteers. This, in turn, has increased the capacity of the partner organisations to work with more families.

## **The activity**

The project was a pilot course that trained parents of children with special needs as peer supporters. West Berkshire Council's community education team allocated funds from the Community Education Fund which aims to support local organisations to deliver community learning to targeted groups. The need for the programme was identified through the parenting programmes for parents of children with special needs that West Berkshire Council have funded for the past three years. The charity delivering these courses, Parenting Special Children, identified potential for developing further opportunities for parents of children with special needs to train to use their knowledge and expertise to act as peer supporters for other parents in a similar position.

The programme was developed and delivered through a partnership of West Berkshire Council, Parenting Special Children and Parent2Parent (P2P), an independent impartial statutory service which supports the parents and carers of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and the professionals who work with them. The Community Education Fund provided funding for the tutors, speakers and administrative costs, Parent2Parent provided funding for the venue and refreshments and Parenting Special Children delivered the learning programme and follow on support.










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The pilot training course recruited 7 parents and ran for 7 weeks with each session lasting 5 hours. Training included the following:

-  listening skills;
-  bereavement and loss pre and post diagnosis;
-  supporting parents through the SEN statutory process;
-  boundaries and confidentiality;
-  lone working;
-  information on local and national organisations supporting families;
-  autism training;
-  supporting families via phone and internet;
-  support for siblings of families with children/young people with disabilities.

Participants were supported to progress to further learning and work as well as volunteer peer mentor roles. Parents' knowledge and therefore confidence increased during the course. After their training, peer supporters were offered regular one to one supervision, six weekly group supervision, ongoing training and support at other times where needed.

Parenting Special Children are in the process of getting the service accredited by the Mentoring and Befriending Association which provides clear guidance on the level of support required for volunteers/befrienders.

*'Peer Supporters offer ongoing one-to-one support following a child's diagnosis, or during the time parents are going through the diagnosis process. Every Peer Supporter is a local parent of a child/young person with additional needs or disability, who has completed our recruitment and training programme. They understand what it is like to receive the news of your child's diagnosis, and the adjustments families have to make when a child is diagnosed with additional needs or a disability'*

Ruth Pearse, CEO of Parenting Special Children

### **The differences this approach has made**

West Berkshire Council ensures that all Community Education Fund projects work to a quality framework which includes individual learning plans, capturing learner feedback and an end of course evaluation. On this occasion a reflective diary was developed which enabled learners to record their personal progress. As Parenting

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Special Children are a small charity they also find it relatively easy to gather information on impact, as they are in communication with all those who have volunteered or now work with Parenting Special Children.

### **Learners**

All those who attended the volunteer training course have progressed to further training through Parent2Parent, Parenting Special Children or other agencies. Learners have also progressed to volunteering opportunities and/or paid work.

Parent/carers of children with disabilities often have difficulties working outside of the home because of the specific needs of their children and the lack of accessible childcare. This can result in low self esteem and a lack of direction. Parenting Special Children have seen a significant increase in parental confidence during the course and afterwards when they are peer supporting and longer term in paid jobs. The course has built on an area where they have a wealth of experience to give them a learning framework and the confidence to support other families who are going through similar experiences.

Three parent/carers on the course have volunteered for Parent2Parent and for Parenting Special Children. One of them is currently applying for teaching assistant posts in local schools and one is now working as a parenting practitioner for Parenting Special Children and is a volunteer peer supporter. Another parent who attended is working for a national charity, although still volunteering with P2P.

Three peer supporters moved into paid employment (Learning Support Assistant in a specialist school; Parent Champion, national health initiative; parenting practitioner). Others who volunteered are also well placed to access employment opportunities as peer supporters within Parenting Special Children do move into paid jobs such as: Children's Centre Manager; Parish Nurse; Health Watch Development Officer; parenting practitioner with Parenting Special Children; Diagnosis Support Service Co-ordinator with Parenting Special Children; and family support worker.

*'I have thoroughly enjoyed the course and feel I have learnt a great deal to take forward in my role as a volunteer'*

*'It was excellent. I have made contacts to help with my son's autism and myself in a new career as a family support worker'* Learners

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### **Managers, staff and volunteers**

The new peer supporters have worked well with their established team of peer supporters and have brought in new ideas and specialist knowledge. One of the peer supporters, for example, has used her background in teaching with the skills learnt on the course to facilitate parenting programmes and speaker events. The charity also gained valuable experience through running the training course for peer supporters and will use this learning to influence and change future training they offer.

### **The organisation**

Parenting Special Children gained three new peer supporters which has allowed them to support more families in Berkshire who are parent/carers of children with disabilities. Two from the training have continued to peer support, one of them is now employed by the charity to run parenting courses and a range of workshops. Another of the parents on the course is being followed-up on how she can be best supported as she has been involved in ADHD workshops and is looking for employment. The programme also provided a good quality learning experience. One of the peer supporters is now playing a significant role within the charity, which has enabled the charity to expand their services.

West Berkshire Council has increased the reach and range of Community Learning in West Berkshire by utilising the experience of the partner organisations, Parenting Special Children and Parent2Parent. The two organisations have been able to collaborate and pool their expertise on the project. Partnering with other organisations also has the added benefit of sharing the costs for the project and has generated a pound plus value in Community Learning for the venue and refreshment costs. In addition the programme has provided a valuable volunteering and employment route for parents who wish to build on their unique experience in special needs.

### **Challenges and solutions**

There was a tight time frame which meant that it was difficult to arrange speakers, although Parenting Special children did manage to do that successfully with a few changes of dates. Parents of children with disabilities can be called away, for example to attend appointments or due to difficulties at school. It was always a challenge to ensure that parent/volunteers were updated on any sessions that they

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missed. The project did this by emailing and arranging a tutorial then the Diagnosis Support Service Co ordinator explained the session and provided course material with the peer supporter.

Since delivering the course there has been a review of the whole Parent2Parent statutory service. This has meant that plans for another partnership bid from Parenting Special Children and Parent2Parent have been put on hold. However, once the new service is in place relationships can be built again with the possibility of developing further volunteer training in the future.

### **Critical factors for success**

The programme was successful because it was designed to respond to the particular circumstances of the parents involved. Being intuitive was critical to success. Often parents attend Parenting Special Children parenting courses initially and express an interest in supporting families. Sometimes they are unaware of what the next step for them may be so it is important to listen and ask them the right questions.

It was important to be aware of the pressures upon families of children/young people with disabilities and being flexible. If a parent/volunteer was unable to attend a session the project arranged a time to ensure that the session material was delivered to them

Having knowledge of national and local organisations who can offer training and working in partnership with them was very effective. This project demonstrated good partnership working between a charity, a statutory service for parents and a local authority. It was an excellent way to share expertise and costs, which was especially important for a small charity.

### **The “golden moment”**

The golden moment came towards the end of the course when it was obvious through verbal and non verbal feedback that parent/volunteers had grown in confidence, gained new knowledge and were excited about the next stage of their journey. One of the parent/volunteers was nominated by the charity for an award for all the work that she had done in supporting families over the past few years and she won West Berkshire Council’s Learner Achievement Award under the category of 'Inspiring Others.'

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### **Additional materials**

West Berkshire Council provides sub-contractors with a Community Education Fund Toolkit; a quality framework which records the RARPA process. The Project Review and Evaluation Form is part of the toolkit and is attached. This forms the basis of a review meeting where sub-contractors are encouraged to consider all aspects of their provision, taking into account views of partners, learners, tutors, identify strengths and areas for improvement. All project reviews then contribute towards the Council's overall self-assessment report for Community Learning and Skills.

**Community Education Fund – Project Review and Evaluation Form** (taken from the Community Education Fund Toolkit)

The Parenting Special Children website provides more detailed information about the partner organisation <http://www.parentingspecialchildren.co.uk/>

### **Contacts for further information**

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