

Swindon SEND Family Voice – a parent carer forum based on Positivity (...and good PR!)

It's important that forums listen to the views of all local parents so that they know what's important to them. In this blog, Chair of parent carer forum Swindon SEND Family Voice, Jacqui Watt, talks about their efforts to reach out to local families.

Two years ago in January 2018, Contact helped parent carers create a new forum in Swindon. We came up with a new name to symbolise a fresh start, and Swindon SEND Families Voice was born!

When we started we only had 77 names on our mailing list and 340 on our Facebook page. The initial issues we faced were building relationships with the local authority and clinical commissioning group (CCG) and trying to engage with parents who didn't know who we were or what our purpose was.

We felt the way to go about engaging with parents was to build up a positive relationship with the local authority, CCG and other local agencies. To do this we have cultured a forum based on positivity! We have aimed to show families that their feedback is being not only listened to but also acted upon - by sharing 'you said, we did' statements on our Facebook page regularly and newsletters.

To build participation from parents, we have always encouraged the local authority and CCG to be 'more visible' and we set up the "Branches" monthly support group, where professionals come and talk to and listen to parent carers. It builds better relationships across the board, creates a better understanding on both sides of the fence, and provides more opportunities for participation, engagement and consultation.

To encourage a buzz around the new group we asked the local newspaper to advertise the information about the first session and then to come along and report on it. We also share information about who our guest speakers are via Facebook and emails.

We have over 20 parents and carers attend each session and write a quarterly newsletter, which not only gets shared with our members but also goes on the local offer and is shared with schools too. The local authority also feature news about the forum on their weekly newsletter [SEND News Splash](#), which gets sent out to over 900 people who pass on to their colleagues.

Two years on and we are in huge demand I'm pleased to say. We have a team of 16 parent representatives and volunteers, many of whom we recruited via our social media advertisement. Our mailing list is now 345, we have 1,537 Facebook followers, the SEND Room (our online support group) has 772 members.

And yes, we will be trying to involve the media in our second birthday party! People have reacted positively to the newsletter and to seeing us in the newspaper too. It shows we are a credible organisation and shows the forum's friendly face!

Here are some news articles about the Swindon SEND Families Voice: [about our launch](#) and [our first birthday](#). And see [the advert the group put on Facebook to attract new members](#).

To find out how your forum can ['Use the media to reach more parent carers and amplify your forum's message'](#) watch the webinar presented by Elaine Bennett from Contact's communications team.