

Q & A's from Contact's 'Being a Parent Rep – Representing Your Parent Carer Community' Training Programme

Parent representatives

What makes a great parent representative?

The most effective parent representatives are parents who are in a place where they feel that they can engage in participation: i.e. they are able to develop positive and constructive working relationships (with other parents and professionals) to find solutions to improve support and services. They recognise that the role is to represent the wider parent voice in all its complexity. They are able to be objective and to focus on the collective view of parents, putting their own personal circumstances or situation to one side.

How are parent reps selected?

Initially parents need to be willing to volunteer and they should say how they feel they can contribute and what their areas of knowledge and interest are. The selection process is decided by each forum at a local level. A good process should include an induction process and training to cover the role of the forum and the role of a parent rep, forum policies and governance and a basic understanding of SEND and SEND law.

What are the minimum expectations of parent reps in terms of selection?

This is decided by each local parent carer forum. Some forums require parents to have attended parent participation training or events, or to have shadowed other parent reps before they undertake the role on their own. Some forums might require parents to have a Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) check.

We are really struggling with having active members. What is the best way to find new members to join us if we have been struggling for a really long time?

There are a number of ways you can attract members e.g. holding information events or family fun events (with a participation element), or organising/hosting training sessions and signing up members at these events. You can use social media to promote the forum, and you can also contact school SENCOs, local support groups and other professionals who work with parent carers and ask them to help you promote the forum (e.g. Early years professionals, those working at Children's centres, social workers etc.)

It can be a daunting prospect to become a parent rep so think through how you can build people's confidence via (for example) training and shadowing a more experienced rep and perhaps consider sending two reps to meetings so they can support one another. There are some useful [webinars on our Resources page](#) on recruiting active members and extending your forum's reach.

Some forums remunerate volunteer parent reps for their time as they see this as an important way of valuing their experience in meetings with professionals. This can also help recruit parent reps though many forums do not remunerate reps. Those who do not can find other ways of attracting parent reps through for example the training they offer or being part of a welcoming and supportive community.

Some forums have used Contact Associates or local consultants to help them build up their active membership. You can talk to your Contact Participation Adviser about this.

What parent representative training do you consider to be best practice?

Contact runs a number of training sessions on this and also have a list of experienced Associates who can offer tailored training for your forum. Speak to your Contact Regional Adviser or other local forums who might be able to recommend a trainer or training programme for you.

We would consider the following topics useful;

- Understanding Co-production
- Role of a forum and parent rep
- Forum governance and policies such as code of conduct, and conflict of interest
- Expenses and remuneration policy
- Safeguarding policy
- Understanding how to contribute effectively to strategic work
- Basic understanding of SEND and SEND law

You can also ask parent reps themselves what training they would find useful to support them in their role

Do you have any advice for how we can reach parent carers with a wide range of experiences/diversity etc.?

There is a webinar about reaching out and ensuring seldom heard voices are heard which you might find useful in the [Helping you to Develop and Grow your Forum](#) section of the Resources page on our website.

Do some research to find out about the make-up of the local population and local groups where parents might meet. Consider organisations such as religious/faith or community groups, and speak to the Local Authority (LA) and Health partners to obtain their statistics and information about the local population.

Contact is creating a toolkit to help forums look at their makeup and membership and to ensure they are representative of their local areas and are able to encourage seldom heard parents to be heard. It is good practice for forums to have Equality and Diversity training and there are many organisations that can provide this such as Diversity Trust.

I'm a newcomer, how do I start getting involved with volunteering my help?

Speak to your forum Chair or Administrator about what opportunities the forum has available and how you can get involved. See what training and support they might be able to offer too. Contact have a [list of local parent carer forums' contact details](#).

You might also wish to watch Contact's film about [why you should join your parent carer forum](#) and our [introduction to parent participation](#) film too.

Being a parent rep sometimes means it takes up most of our working days or more. Mainly due to meetings outside of the forum. As it's done on the back of our time volunteering, sometimes it feels like I am not doing justice to it as I can't spare that much time. How to get around that?

There are two main aspects to this. One strategy is to recognise that a forum cannot do everything so it is necessary to prioritise your efforts and think about what will make the greatest impact. Secondly, it is important to carve out some time to focus on recruiting and training more parents to be involved so that you can share the workload between more people.

Rather than seeking parents for specific roles, you might want to recruit parents and then find out what they are interested in and how they can help your organisation. You can also identify their training and support needs. You can offer some shadowing opportunities and have two parents attend each strategic meeting if you can to help build up their confidence and understanding of their role. It might mean that others already involved need to be flexible and change what they were supporting with, which offers new development opportunities for them also. Managing volunteers can take up a lot of time but is worth the effort.

You could also aim to recruit a team of parent reps who are not part of your committee but who are supported by a couple of people from the committee so it is not the same people doing everything!

Role of the Forum

Surely a parent carer forum IS a form of support group for parents?

Yes, we would agree that Parent Carer Forums will offer peer support to their members however it is not their primary remit. All activities should be organised with participation, co-production and service improvement in mind, as this is the main role of the forum. For example, you can run a coffee morning and parents would receive support or information there, but you could use that event to run a survey or to get feedback on a service or consultation.

It is however increasingly recognised that forums can be supportive communities and particularly in smaller geographical areas this can be a great way of creating a community where you can draw on the experiences of the local parent carer community directly. Some forums have sought additional funding so they can provide support and reduce isolation and say this has helped them to extend their reach and include the voice of seldom heard

parents too to strengthen the collective voice of parents so there can be some crossover between support groups and parent carer forums. It is up to each forum to decide on which approach is right for them and how they will reach out to families based on their funding and capacity.

What happens if a parent is desperate on what to do and not happy with their local SENDIAS (SEND local advice and support service) and English is not their first language but you are able to provide them with next steps rather than signpost?

Forums are not specialist advice organisations and those who do provide this level of support should have professional indemnity insurance to cover any advice given. They should also ensure that they're trained to a sufficient level and keep up with their training as well as work within service quality standards. Individuals within the forum can signpost to information if they have the knowledge and experience to do this but this is not the primary role of the forum. The forum can however signpost to other organisations who are set up to give advice like Contact , IPSEA and some disability specific charities . The Local Offer should list all the support and advice groups in the local area.

If this is a wider issue in the area for parents where English is not their first language then this is something the forum can raise directly with the LA to discuss a way forward and how this can be improved.

Additionally, the forum should not become a replacement for an inadequate service from the local statutory services, in this case the local SENDIAS service. Therefore, in this instance, the forum might want to understand what the issues are with SENDIAS and whether other parents have had similar issues, so that the forum can raise it with the Local Authority when they are reviewing the SENDIAS service. Additionally, if the information or the format that the parent needs is missing from the Local Offer, the forum could raise this with the Local Authority too.

Developing Participation/Co-production

Is the main purpose of co-production to improve the outcomes of the children/young people involved? How could that be summed up in a three word phrase?

The main purpose, as we see it, is for the representation of the parent carer voice to lead to improved support and services to help improve the lives of children, young people and their families. Three words - 'improving families' lives'!

Can the LA and services work co-productively with individual parents or representatives rather than the PCF? What can the PCF do in that situation?

Should other support groups sit alongside the forums at LA and health meetings?

How do other support groups fit in (section 3.18 of CoP)?

Yes - they can work with individuals and support groups. Parent Carer Forums should not necessarily be the exclusive voice. However, the Parent Carer Forum offers a route for Local Authorities and Health to understand the wider parental and family perspective across the local area, rather than individual or condition specific voices. The aim of the forum is to be a collective voice for parents of children with SEND and the DFE funding means that they are

considered by the DFE to be the LA's strategic partner so should be working with the forum in this way.

Local Authorities are actively encouraged in the SEND Code of Practice to work with their local Parent Carer Forum and they must involve their local PCF when reviewing the Local Offer. Therefore, forums can draw on the wording in the SEND Code of Practice to start conversations with any Local Authorities who are not engaging with the PCF but who are choosing to work with other groups or individuals.

In the SEND Code of Practice, it states:

- Parent Carer Forums have been established in most local areas and Local Authorities are actively encouraged to work with them (1.13)
- Local Authorities should involve children, young people and parents (including local Parent Carer Forums and Youth Forums) in the design or commissioning of services providing information, advice and support in order to ensure that those services meet local needs. (2.6)
- Staff providing information, advice and support should work with their local Parent Carer Forum and other representative user groups (such as Youth Forums) to ensure that the views and experiences of children, young people and parents inform policy and practice. (2.8)
- At a strategic level, partners must engage children and young people with SEN and disabilities and children's parents in commissioning decisions, to give useful insights into how to improve services and outcomes. Local Authorities, CCGs (Clinical Commissioning Groups) and NHS England must develop effective ways of harnessing the views of their local communities so that commissioning decisions on services for those with SEN and disabilities are shaped by users' experiences, ambitions and expectations. To do this, Local Authorities and CCGs should engage with local Healthwatch organisations, patient representative groups, Parent Carer Forums, groups representing young people with SEN and disabilities and other local voluntary organisations and community groups. (3.18)
- Local Authorities must review their provision, taking into consideration the experiences of children, young people and families (including through representative groups such as Parent Carer Forums), voluntary and community sector providers and local Healthwatch. Information from such reviews will contribute to future arrangements and the effectiveness of local joint working. (3.29)
- Joint commissioning arrangements should help partners identify scope for working more efficiently together. Partners should assess the extent to which activities contribute to their local priorities and outcomes and decide which services should be commissioned or decommissioned, in consultation with children and young people with SEN or disabilities, their parents, or representative groups such as Parent Carer Forums. (3.35)
- Local Authorities should publicise in their Local Offer the ways in which they will involve children, young people and parents in developing and reviewing it. Local Authorities should ensure that they provide support that enables children, young people and parents to contribute to decision-making at this strategic level and the Local Offer should include details of this support, which should include Parent Carer

Forums and local voluntary organisations. (4.10)

If there are competing groups then in the spirit of co-production, Contact would encourage the PCF to attempt to work with the other organisation(s). The Parent Carer Forum can invite other individuals and groups to engage with their work, to work together to have an even stronger voice. However, some parents might choose not to engage with their local PCF – for whatever reason – and if the Local Authority or Health choose to also work with them, that is absolutely fine as long as it is also within a broader participation agenda.

What's the guarantee that the LA will take parents forum seriously and meet the needs of SEN kids?

There is no guarantee LA's will work with parents in partnership however the Statutory framework that is in place does require the Local Authority and Health to engage with parents in the spirit of co-production (rather than as a tick box exercise). If forums can demonstrate their value and professionals recognise that value, then it can become a win-win situation. This does not mean the responsibility for making the relationship work lies with the forum, but in our experience, once the benefits of co-production are seen, then there is more incentive for professionals to continue to work this way.

You could try to find one or two advocates within the Local Authority who have experienced positive outcomes from co-production and working with parents, who can help you build relationships with others.

Joint Ofsted/ CQC inspections review how effectively local areas are meeting the needs of children and young people with SEN. Inspectors seek the views of parents to see how their families' needs are being met. Forums should be involved in this process and the inspection will look at how the local area is using parents' views to shape services. You can find out more about [joint-inspections-of-local-area-send-provision](#) on the government's website.

What happens if an LA does not want to co-produce or engage at all and is coming up with excuses continuously?

If this happens do speak to your Contact Regional Adviser for advice. They might be able to provide Associate support to help facilitate conversations with the Local Authority, or they could speak to the Local Authority or the Regional DfE Adviser in the area on your forum's behalf. And your Regional Adviser can signpost you to [training](#) including training run by Contact.

Do you have examples of co-production within Local Authorities - where their parental voices have been heard and implemented?

Contact has a number of resources about co-production including webinars about different areas approaches and a video. Additionally, the National Network of Parent Carer Forums and Contact both publish Annual Reports, and have a newsletter you can sign up to for information which include examples of approaches that are working and examples of where forums and their partners have worked together to improve services. You can find these in the [Resources section](#) of our website and [here](#).

Is it general practice that you are asked by the meeting organiser, to add agenda items to a meeting agenda?

Normally the Chair is responsible for pulling together a meeting agenda from other committee or steering group members so everyone has an opportunity to contribute to agenda items (by a deadline). Also, there is normally an 'Any other business' section at the end for people to add additional items not discussed in time allocated for the meeting. Or an item can be put onto the agenda for the next meeting. If you want to add something to a meeting agenda contact the Chair of the meeting to discuss. Contact has a webinar about running effectively as a committee – you can find this on the [forum-resources page](#) of our website.

Often we are asked just to attend the meeting and there is no opportunity to give feedback. How can this be addressed?

As above, contact the meeting Chair and ask them for the opportunity to add one or more items to the agenda. Ask to be placed in the first half of the meeting, to ensure that if the meeting over-runs your item is still covered. The Chair's role is to facilitate decision-making by the committee and to ensure everyone has a chance to contribute. There should be opportunity to feed into discussions.

Again you may want to watch the webinar about how to run effective committees on the [forum-resources page](#). In addition [Community Matters](#) are able to offer parent carer forums advice on governance, policies etc. to help you run the forum. If your forum is not already a member contact your Regional Adviser to find out how to sign up for free membership through Contact's core offer of support.

Paid staff and non-parents

How do you see paid staff fitting into parent carer representation?

Some parent carer forums work with unpaid volunteers and unpaid parent reps. For some forums they recognise the need to pay parent carers to be involved as parent reps as well as other roles involved in running the forum. Some forums employ admin or outreach staff to manage the day to day running of the forum and sometimes when it has not been possible to find a parent rep to cover a strategic meeting then the forum may ask a paid worker to attend. This will depend on a number of factors such as the forum's policy, whether the worker is also a parent carer and the agreement with the LA.

If the worker is employed by a host organisation on behalf of the forum then additional care is needed to consider any conflicts of interest and to ensure they are representing the forum and not their employer.

Paid staff often play a vital role in parent carer forums and forums can spend up to 75% of your DfE grant on staffing currently (it was previously 50%).

How do people fit in if they have not got a child or young person with SEND?

Some forums will co-opt non-parent carers to their steering committee/management team but this depends on each forum's constitution or governing documents and whether the individuals can offer unique skills and knowledge that are not available from the local parent carer community. It is important, however, that the forum is primarily led by parent carers, rather than being driven by non-parent carers. Other volunteers can offer additional skills often much needed in a forum like the role of treasurer, social media, website development etc.

Conflicts of interest

Can you be an Admin paid and chair?

This can depend on the legal structure of the organisation but it is not considered to be good practice for a Chair to be paid for their role as Chair, especially if the forum is set up as a charity. It is hard to differentiate between the roles of chair so ideally it is preferable to have separate people in these roles. If in doubt contact [Community Matters](#) for advice. If you haven't signed up for free membership do contact your Regional Adviser to find out how to do this.

Can we share petitions with parents that might interest them?

Yes this is fine to do, as long as you make it clear that the forum is not running the petition and that the forum is not campaigning/lobbying. Contact has a webinar as to how to work effectively with campaign organisations. You can find this in the [Co-production](#) section of the Forum Resources page on our website.

What if you have a conflict of interest where you need to complain to a CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) about a service but you are also a parent rep?

You should declare this as a conflict of interest to your Chair/committee at all meetings you attend whilst you are in the complaints process. They will determine, according to their local policy, in what capacity you can be involved in forum activities. For example, you probably should not be a parent representative in Health meetings when complaining about the CCG, but could help the forum with events for parents or promoting the forum until the matter is resolved.

I work for NHS do I have to declare to my employer that I am a parent rep?

We would suggest that you do declare this both to the forum and to your employer.

Did I hear that Chair or Trustee of Parent Carer Forum cannot also be the 'parent rep'?

No, it is absolutely fine for them to be a parent representative if your own forum constitution/governance allows it.

Can you be an advocate and a parent rep or would this be classed as a conflict of interest?

It is likely to be a conflict of interest so should be declared to your forum Chair/committee at every meeting. They will then be able to determine how you can engage according to

their conflict of interest policy. It can also be difficult to do both well and to separate the depth of challenges that you listen to as an advocate for individual families and from a more objective roles as parent rep though some people can do this effectively, others find it difficult to and may find themselves getting angry about individual cases in meetings with LA officers that they meet in their advocacy role.

Gathering and presenting evidence

In addition to PCF information and evidence do LAs not also gather such information to inform and guide their activities?

Yes - they do gather data and information, for instance for the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) which should be published. However, forums will want to gather additional evidence and information to complement the data that the Local Authority holds, as it is specifically from the parent carer perspective. There can be advantages for forums to gather evidence themselves, as parents will often have more trust in sharing their experiences with a forum than the LA. Some forums and LA's will share anonymised raw data with each other and discuss the key issues arising from this and possible solutions.

Have you got some case studies of examples of a Parent Carer presenting evidence for families?

Presenting your findings and what you have done to change things is really important so your parent carer community know what you are doing and the difference you are making. A number of Contact's webinars such as the 'Making Your Case' webinar in the [Help you Run and Grow your Forum](#) section of our website also give advice and examples on how to present information and your findings to the LA and/or CCG. You can also look on Parent Carer Forum websites for reports and survey results that they have shared, and speak to other forums in your local region/your Contact Regional Adviser too.

Are there resources available to help gather the information for the forum?

There are online resources such as Survey Monkey, Snap Surveys and Google Forms which you can use to run local surveys. You can use search engines and websites to find local, regional and national statistics and reports (e.g. ONS data, gov.uk, your local offer). You can run online events using Zoom and Microsoft teams and you can use polls in those events. Mentimeter and Padlet are other resources you could use to gather information. Some forums are also happy to share examples of their surveys to prevent forums reinventing the wheel. There is a useful webinar about Using Technology in the [help you Run and Grow your Forum](#) section of our website.

Miscellaneous

Coercion is sometimes used by providers (like school) to influence views of a child. Is there a process in place to prevent this?

This is a difficult question to answer here and should be discussed with the forum to see if is a wider issue for other parents carers in the school or within the local area. Do discuss this or any other issues that arise with your [Regional Parent Participation Adviser](#).

One question I have is about legislation which was discussed, concerning the child/young person's voice, can someone point me to the specific point in legislation where this is stated please as our Local Authority want to remove a step in my sons EHCP where it states for him to have a say in his future, he is 19 and we have just secured funding after a fight for a residential college!

We would suggest that you discuss this with one of our advisers on the Contact helpline <https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/> and/or contact the organisation [Preparing for Adulthood](#) for guidance on this.

You can also look at the SEND Code of Practice Section 1.3 which places a duty on Local Authorities to involve children, their parents and young people in discussions and decisions as per below. The link to the SEND Code of Practice is [here](#). There is also more in 1.11 and references throughout the document.

Local Authorities must ensure that children, their parents and young people are involved in discussions and decisions about their individual support and about local provision. 1.4 Early years providers, schools and colleges should also take steps to ensure that young people and parents are actively supported in contributing to needs assessments, developing and reviewing Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.

Specifically, Local Authorities must

- ensure the child's parents or the young person are fully included in the EHC needs assessment process from the start, are fully aware of their opportunities to offer views and information, and are consulted about the content of the plan (Chapter 9)
- consult children with SEN or disabilities, and their parents and young people with SEN or disabilities when reviewing local SEN and social care provision (Chapter 4)
- consult them in developing and reviewing their Local Offer (Chapter 4)
- make arrangements for providing children with SEN or disabilities, and their parents, and young people with SEN or disabilities with advice and information about matters relating to SEN and disability (Chapter 2)

For further information on any of these issues please contact your [Regional Parent Participation Adviser](#).