

Working through a process of change – ‘Listen 4 Change’ St Helens Parent Carer Forum



Listen 4 Change is the Department for Education (DfE) funded parent carer forum in St Helens and currently receives the £17,500 from the DfE to carry out the strategic parent carer participation work in the area. There are 11 parent carers involved in the Listen 4 Change Steering Group, you can see who they are and what brings them to the parent carer forum here - [Meet The Team - Listen4Change](#)

The forum has been through several changes in the last 12 months and has re-established as an independent group, we know there are lots of forums out there that have been through or are going through similar changes so we thought we'd take this opportunity to ask Listen 4 Change a few questions that may help and inspire other forums to work through a process of change.

- ***What has been the hardest thing about re-establishing as an independent volunteer led parent carer forum?***

Loss of resources - We had used the host organisation's venue, IT database, equipment etc. and so ended up running the forum from our mobile phones for several months! Until our priority grant was approved, we weren't able to purchase laptops and although Contact was really supportive and stepped in to hold the grant on our behalf, it meant that the purchase process was quite long winded so by the time we had ordered the laptops, they were out of

stock! It was 6 months from deciding to separate from the host organisation to receiving laptops and a printer.

Setting up a bank account - Not being able to easily access funds, the process was long-winded and cumbersome, having to re-write a Constitution and Financial Control Policy and appoint a Treasurer before we could even start the application.

Reduced capacity – We went from having two members of staff employed via the host organisation for a total of 26 hours a week to being run completely by volunteers for the most part of our first year. This meant that we relied on Steering Group members to contribute significant extra hours to keep the forum operational until we were in a position to apply for the grant and consider what paid help we needed.

- ***What has been the biggest learning curve from the process?***

Understanding the processes - The grant application, writing procedures and policies required - we'd not been involved in any of this before.

Parent Carer engagement - Creating a new website, a Facebook page and a members-only group to reach parent carers was a huge learning curve, especially as we'd previously only ever used email to communicate with our members.

Knowing our Steering Group - Every member of our Steering Group is committed to improving local services to best meet the needs of children and young people with SEND but each one of us has a different set of skills and different capacity to drive forward parent participation and co-production. Exploring the skills and lived experiences of the Steering Group, holding more frequent Steering Group meetings and having to get involved in aspects of running a Forum that took us out of our comfort zone was new to us. However, it has meant that we have gotten to know each other better and have all taken a more active role in the running of the forum, each finding our natural role within the Steering Group and the value we bring to the forum.

- ***What would you do differently if you had the chance?***

Reduce pressure immediately - We focused on maintaining the same level of parent participation and co-production with the local authority and ICB. However, striving to provide the same level of service but without the expertise of previous staff and without the underpinning infrastructure that we'd had access to as part of the host organisation, put immense pressure on all members of the Steering Group.

Skills analysis sooner - We used a Contact Associate to help us carry out a Skills Analysis and this really set us in motion. We should have done this much sooner than we did so as to have a clearer understanding of our skill set and capacity.

- ***What would you say to other parent carer forums that find themselves in a similar situation to inspire them?***

You can do it - If we can do it, anybody can!

Keep moving forward - Don't stay where it's familiar and comfortable if it's not working for you as a forum.

Look for peer support opportunities - Reach out to other forums to gather their experiences and best practice. Meeting with other forums was insightful, inspirational and spurred us on with the possibility of what we could become.

Get some focussed expert advice - Use part of your grant to fund a *Contact Associate. Their knowledge, experience of how other Forums work and ability to be independent and detached from the emotional aspects of leaving a long-standing host organisation and becoming our own forum was invaluable in putting everything into perspective when we were overwhelmed with the extent of the task facing us and moving us forward in a structured way.

Establish a Partnership Agreement - with the Local Authority and ICB so everyone is clear on what is expected of them and values each other. Be open, honest and clear with partners of capacity limitations. As we are committed and passionate about working in co-production and improving local services, we attended almost every workstream that we received a request for as we were trying to continue the same level of participation as we'd previously delivered under our host organisation. However, this put significant pressure on us as volunteers and on our roles as parent carers. Be cautious of the pressure that services put on you to deliver. Be clear that you are volunteers, parent carers and often have work commitments to manage too.

*Forums are independent organisations; they can decide to buy in support from Contact or other organisations.