

## **About Cheshire West & Chester Parent Carer Forum's Volunteering Model and Funding**

Cheshire West & Chester Parent Carer Forum (PCF) is an independent, constituted group led and run by parent carers. While the forum funds a part-time administrator, the organisation is driven almost entirely by volunteers who are themselves parent carers. These volunteers play a vital role in supporting other families, helping them understand and navigate the SEND system, and ensuring that parent carers' experiences and views influence local services and decision-making.

The PCF is funded solely by the DFE grant of £17,500 per year. The PCF covers a very large geographic area which includes two main urban centres as well as rural communities. Through its volunteer network the PCF work hard to reach as many parent carers from the borough as possible so that a wide range of experiences are represented and influence strategic decision making.

### **What Volunteers Do**

Over time the forum has developed into a supportive community where parent carers can connect with each other, learn, and empower each other on their SEND journey.

Julie Duff the PCF Chair said *"We have a genuine army of volunteers on the group who are purely down to parent power. And the forum tries to reach as many parents as they can with the limited money we have."*

The PCF host at least three in-person formal forums a year from 10am-2pm with around 70 parents attending each event. These events focus on different topics such as Mental Health, Neurodiversity and Preparing for Adulthood .

Lucy Kennerley the PCF Vice Chair said *"The in-person forums cost quite a bit of money as we hire a venue and solely rely on the goodwill, time and dedication of our volunteers to run. We buy parents attending lunch which we extend to the professionals that come to meet the parents. The forums give parent carers an opportunity to meet professionals and ask questions and to find out what services are out there. As well as meeting other parents in similar situations as them it helps them not to feel isolated and to know that there is support out there. If parents can't attend they can ask questions of professionals in advance and we can get back to them. In further support we have created a blog area on our website (run by another parent volunteer) where we write up what happened at the forum and share resources. The last forum we did was on Neurodiversity had 70 parents attending and we did a [blog](#) about the event."*

Volunteers also run lots of coffee mornings right across the borough including "sip and learns" where professionals come along to meet parents and answer questions. Parents discuss topics such as EHCPs, wraparound care and health services. Events are held at each end of the borough to help parents attend.

To support working parents the PCF record online forum and training events which are uploaded to their YouTube channel. <http://www.youtube.com/@pcfcwac6168>. And occasionally hold evening virtual forums of coffee events, but say this is tricky to get volunteers to give their time as they have their caring duties. Volunteers also host smaller more informal events so they can reach more parents including those who may be seldom heard and are in digital poverty.

Lucy said; *"Although these kinds of engagement events are low cost, the cost of volunteers giving up their time working around their caring duties is high and a commitment to their passion and dedication to help reach as many of the parent carers as possible."*



### Flyer of events this year

The PCF has a network of 22 school representative across all age groups in specialist and mainstream schools, resource provisions and alternative provision and post 16 settings. These volunteers act as the forum’s eyes and ears on the ground. They share information with parents about what is available and how to get support, listen to concerns and feed back issues to the steering group so they can act on these. The PCF say these volunteers are the heartbeat of the forum.



### Some of the PCF team

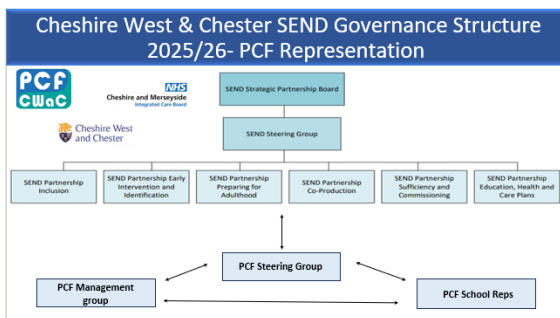


### A PCF Forum event

Volunteers also lead on the PCF Steering Group which is made up of parent carers but also professionals from Health, Education and Social Care Services, SENDIAS and the voluntary sector. The views and experiences of parent carers gathered at engagement events and via the school reps

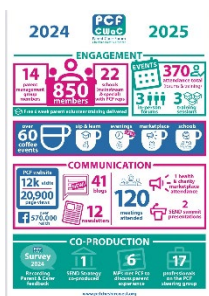
are brought to this group. This enables the PCF to feedback to parents, challenge professionals where needed, and ensure accountability. This is then fed up to the SEND Partnership board where the PCF have a seat at this decision making table.

Lucy said; “Parent carers’ experiences are fed back to the highest level (see image below). There is a continuous feedback loop between the school reps, PCF management team (volunteers responsible for the day to day running of the forum) and the PCF steering group which is taken back into the delivery groups of the councils SEND strategy where volunteers sit and then right up to the partnership board. All groups meet on a regular basis totalling up to hundreds of hours volunteer contributions a year.”



In total the PCF have 34 volunteers. This includes 14 parent management representatives who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the forum and sitting on workstreams and 22 school reps feeding back what they hear, sharing information and supporting forums and coffee events and focus groups. PCF volunteers also sit on over 40 strategic workstreams across the local system.

You can see a snapshot of the forum’s work and reach from the last academic year below.



### Recruiting, Training and Supporting Volunteers

Parent carers find out about volunteering opportunities in a number of ways including the online training the forum run, drop ins, coffee events, online forums, via the schools network, monthly newsletter and a biannual survey. The PCF provides clear information about who they are and what they do, alongside a school representative role description and a detailed volunteer handbook.

At the start of the academic year the PCF do a big push to raise awareness about the PCF and advertise for volunteers by promoting a series of blog posts about who they are, what they do for example one on [get to know us better](#) to encourage parents to get involved. Parent carers can express an interest in volunteering on an [online form](#).

Lucy said; *“As a group, we take pride in our integrity and shared values. Each year, during our end-of-academic-year planning meeting, we come together to review our mission and [mission and vision](#) and [code-of-conduct](#). This collaborative approach ensures every volunteer has a voice in shaping how they work, while also helping us respect and protect each other’s time. Time is the most precious resource our volunteers give, and we value it deeply.”*

## **Training**

The forum run a 6 week [volunteer training course](#) for all parent volunteers. In the first week the PCF’s Regional Contact Adviser and NNPCF Regional Rep do an introduction to show volunteers how the forum fits locally into the national context and they learn about coproduction. In the following weeks they hear from various SEND professionals on different topics and take part in sessions on communication and preparing for meetings, and mental wellbeing. This helps equip and empower the volunteers to navigate the SEND system and for when they become a rep or attend the PCF steering group. Training materials and presentations for volunteers are made available on their [website](#).

## **Support for Volunteers**

Volunteers receive ongoing support from the forum.

Lucy said; *“We are in constant contact with our volunteers, we will make sure that new volunteers shadow existing volunteers until they feel confident. The school reps have their own WhatsApp group and are supported by a Schools Rep Lead who provides support and guidance to reps and ensures they have access to training resources and key information and the Lead liaises with the steering group on the issues being raised by parent carers. The reps have their own network WhatsApp group where they share information and support each other.”*

*“The volunteers’ WhatsApp group is also a great source of support for everyone. It is a safe space where they can ask questions and find out more.”*

*“We would love to be able to reward our volunteers more than we can. Every volunteer is sent a small token of our appreciation at Christmas to thank them for their contributions and recognise the time and effort they put into making our families journey easier.”*

## **Why the Volunteering Model Works**

The PCF currently only receive DFE funding and believe the volunteering model helps them to reach as many parents as possible and helps to ensure parent carers voices are heard in strategic decision-making. Being part of the forum also empowers parent carers in their own SEND journeys by connecting them with a supportive community.

Julie said; *‘We make every penny count we stretch that money as far as we possible and the only reason we can do this is because we have a genuine army of volunteers on the ground who are hosting events for us. We are not having to buy in time or services it is purely down to parent power and helps us to reach as many parents as we can with the limited money we have.’*

They believe the model also helps with capacity as it ensures PCF leads don’t get overloaded.

Julie said *“Although we have limited funding our volunteer model means we are not reliant on the Steering Group and management group having to do it all.”*

You can read more about the forum's work including the training the PCF offers parent carers, their biannual survey and the strategic work [here](#) and on their [website](#). You can hear more about their survey on the [online learning session](#) they did with Contact.