

Coproduction in Action - Improving Communications and Information on the School Travel Service in Southampton

What was the Issue?

Southampton Parent Carer Forum (SPCF) was hearing from parent carers that communication with parent carers about school travel support was often problematic and parents could not always access the information they needed. As a result relationships between staff and parent carers were often strained.

The SPCF did a survey of parent carers on school travel support and produced a [report](#) that they submitted to the School Travel Service team highlighting the main issues and outlining recommendations.

Annamarie Hooper, Service Manager, said, *“We have worked closely with the Southampton Parent Carer Forum over the last few years to improve our communications and information about the service so it is clearer and better. We have made changes as a result of their feedback that have hopefully improved the customer experience”.*

What approach did the SPCF and LA take?

The School Travel team listened to the issues raised by the SPCF, and Senior Managers decided to work closely with the SPCF to seek to resolve the issues around communication. And for all members of the School Travel Service to have more direct contact with families using the service to hear directly about their experiences.



Chris Russell, Travel Service Manager, said; *“Managing the School Travel Service has been eye-opening for me. I was 7 years as a Procurement Manager which took a very black and white commercial approach. Thirteen months of meeting service users and speaking to parent carers and meeting families has really had an impact on how I view and carry out my role.*

“The Report showed us clearly how important school travel is for parent carers and just how much families rely on this and on their children and young people going to school or college for respite so they can recharge or work, particularly after the long Summer holidays.”

What did they do?

The SPCF and School Travel Service arranged to **meet monthly** to discuss service standards and planned changes which gave the School Travel team a chance to sense-check things with the forum to try and head off some of the issues and find solutions earlier. Over time this developed into a truly collaborative approach and the School Travel team are able to troubleshoot situations that arise before things are escalated and hear feedback to support improvement to the service.

School Travel staff began to **attend forum events** so all members of the School Travel team are able to meet and get to know parent carers and families. Staff attended recent annual fun days, drop-ins and coffee mornings where they met families and heard about their experiences and got to know the children and families and understand their needs. This gave them a better insight into the day-to-day challenges families face and the difficulties some families face including things like filling in forms and accessing some aspects of the service.

Communications were co-produced with the SPCF and planned well in advance with the School Travel team and Council's Communications team. They simplified the communications about school travel offers and clarified the information on the website that parent carers were finding confusing.

The School Travel team increased **communications over the summer holidays** e.g. via social media so families felt better informed and prepared. They improved the accessibility of outgoing communications, with easy-to-read formats, and improved the website and ensured it was updated regularly. They improved the timeliness and regularity of communications, so parent carers felt more reassured about plans without being overloaded with too much information.

The School Travel team **improved the process and gave more information** on who the family were entrusting their child or young person to at the end of term earlier and what would be in place. The School Travel team and SPCF also put in place a process where all families are regularly asked to give feedback on the service, and this is monitored to ensure improvements are having the desired impact. And a new text alert system was established which informs families more quickly if there are changes in provision e.g. change of Passenger Assistant/driver or taxi is running .

The School Travel Service identified their **own review taking on the feedback from the PCF** and this was embedded as standard practice.

Annamarie Hooper, Service Manager, said; *"It's been great to build a relationship with the Parent Carer Forum where we work closely together to support the SEND community. Co-producing has helped shape our communications to ensure they are customer friendly, the team have enjoyed meeting our customers at some of the Forum's great events, such as coffee mornings and awaydays, and the Forum has been invaluable by providing feedback that we have been able to act upon and during policy public consultation communication events. We hope to continue building our relationship for the benefit of our customers".*

Why did this approach work?

By meeting up with the SPCF on a regular basis the School Travel team was able to build up a relationship where they could work on things together in co-production. The team appreciated the lived experience of the SPCF reps. They also found getting feedback on people's lived experiences improved their understanding and communication and helped them provide a better overall service.

Meeting parent carers and children / young people face to face helped staff get to know families and hearing their experiences has helped improve relationships between School Travel staff and parent carers to provide better services to individual families.

Chris from the Travel Team said; *“One of the things that has really changed things is ensuring that all staff in our transport team all get a chance to go to things like coffee mornings and drop-ins and meet families direct. Being part of events and having an opportunity for parents to answer questions and talk about things like independent travel training and passenger assistance in an informal way so we can make sure this meets young people’s needs. And senior managers who are not on the frontline get to meet everyone involved and see the hard work the staff do to make it work for families.”*

Staff attending events were able to feedback what they heard to their office. Sometimes the School Travel team weren’t aware of things or similar incidents were not communicated. Once they knew about these issues, they were able to make improvements. It also meant they could pick up

miscommunications and nip them in the bud. Feedback from parent carers, for example on some unintentional unhelpful staff approaches, meant the School Travel team could address these and provide training or suggest ways this could be improved.

Kelly Sydenham, Co-director of the Southampton Parent Carer Forum, said; *“Our relationship with the School Travel Team means we can now support them & parents to address issues before they become a complaint, saving everyone time and improving outcomes for all involved. We are also able to feedback what works well and support positive changes. Overall it is a team approach to providing an effective school travel service.”*

Through working together over time and attending events together the SPCF has come to be regarded as a trusted partner

The School Travel Service now share their plans and developments with the Parent Carer Forum which allows them to contribute and look at how these changes may impact families.

Chris from the Travel team said; *“A positive for me is I think we now as a team really appreciate the SPCF for what it is and its expertise. They really know their stuff! And they are approachable people. I think previously staff felt the SPCF was trying to undermine the service, but that perception has changed. Staff could be prickly when the SPCF raised things but as the relationship has developed, I am pleased to say that my team now see it as a support mechanism and are more receptive to reviewing information and appreciate it more.”*

Kelly from SPCF said; *“The team are great at listening to our feedback on how things may be received by families and adjusting plans or wording of communications accordingly. Having the team come to our events and meet families has been hugely beneficial to both them and families giving everyone much better understanding of each others needs.”*

Meeting parents face-to-face has helped the team provide more suitable services

The School Travel team work more closely with families on finding solutions which parent carers appreciate as they feel more part of the process and are able to put their own view. It also means they listen to suggestions for improvements to the service from parent carers themselves.

Chris from the Travel team said; *"The School Travel Service is never going to be perfect, but it needs to be good enough. It is a highly operational service and we have a huge number of routes with 1300 children and young people needing travel support. Some have very complex needs or behaviour that challenges and some need equipment, like harnesses, to travel. It needs to meet the needs of families. And the only way we can do this is by working together within the parameters of the policy."*

"We can see the huge difference this can make. We have seen parent carers who were distraught but are now happy as they are able to work because their child's vehicle transport is working well. Conversations can be more about what is possible."

Kelly from the Parent Carer Forum said; *"The School Travel team share their plans and developments with us which allows us to contribute and look at how these changes may impact families. The team are great at listening to our feedback on how things may be received by families and adjusting plans or wording of communications accordingly. Having the team come to our events and meet families has been hugely beneficial to both them and families giving everyone much better understanding of each others needs."*

Face to face contact with families and staff training has meant relationships between School Travel staff and Parent Carers have improved

Meeting parent carers directly and hearing about their lived experiences means staff have a better understanding of the difficulties parent carers face day to day. It has meant staff have more empathy when taking calls and can provide a better service when issues arise as they better understand the challenges a parent carer may have had overnight (or that morning or that week) and the pressure they may be under before they make the call. It means staff take a more empathetic approach.

Chris said; *"Faceless conversations are very different from the ones you have in person. Communications can be less about raw emotion or aggression and more about making it work."*

Getting to know parent carers and hearing their lived experiences and staff training on SEND about the reality of parent carers experiences has helped staff cope with challenging calls when they arise, not take things personally and to feel more resilient.

The improved communication with parent carers and collaboration with SPCF has seen a reduction in complaints received by the School Travel Service. Adopting a more proactive approach to issues that arise has allowed them to address concerns before they escalate into a formal complaint.

Kelly from the Parent Carer Forum said; *"It is really helpful for the forum to also have a greater understanding of the school travel team, their processes and work streams. Their role is much wider than most parents were aware. Being able to share this has led to greater understanding."*

School Travel

Working on communications together and with the LA's Communications team means information is easier to access, more accurate and timely

Some of the information that was being provided about school travel was confusing for parent carers or difficult to access so the LA and SPCF worked together to improve this on the Local Offer and website. And staff are now trained so they can provide accurate information on rights and what is available. As a result the LA's information on school transport is now regulatorily compliant and updated when required.

Chris from the School Travel team said; *"The regulatory policies are the backbone of the service. All the SPCF is asking for is for this to be followed and for parent carers to get information in a timely manner and an easy to understand format. Staff now know that the SPCF is fighting our corner to make sure we meet these regulations and policies, and they help us head off issues so they are less defensive. There is now more openness and trust."*

Future Plans

The School Travel team plan to continue to meet monthly with the SPCF and to work in partnership with them, seeking co-production opportunities.

The School Travel team will continue to ensure staff in the team at all levels attend events where the can **meet families face to face** to hear their views and experiences to help them better understand their role and the importance school travel has in families lives. And to hear the challenges parent carers are experiencing and the complexity of meeting their children or young people's needs.

The School Travel team are looking at making further improvements to their **staff training** for existing staff and new staff on SEND and to ensure staff know about what support is on offer.

The School Travel team are looking to implement a call handling system so that they can better manage and triage calls. It will **record calls** between parent carers and the School Travel team so they can use this in training so they can learn from difficult situations and how to handle calls and complaints better. It can also give staff support if a call is not going well as someone else can intervene so staff feel better supported.

The School Travel team are also looking at improving their monitoring of calls **to identify any systemic issues** so they can address these.

The School Travel team are planning a **parent app** to improve vehicle transport information for parent carers; options are currently being researched.

Annamarie, Service Manager said, *"We aim to keep working closely with the SPCF as we value their knowledge, expertise and feedback to help us to continue improving our communications and information and how we interact with customers. We have demonstrated that working together provides more positive results and that we are heading in the right direction"*.

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