

Summary of local  
area practice

# **ENABLERS FOR INVOLVING FAMILIES IN REDUCING PARENTAL CONFLICT SERVICE PLANNING**



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## **Acknowledgments**

We'd like to thank all those who participated in the discussions and generously shared their insights and perspectives. Finally thank you to Robyn Tulloch, Bethan Le Maistre, Helen BurrIDGE and other colleagues from Foundations for their guidance and support.

## **Funding and competing interests**

Foundations received funding from the Department for Work and Pensions, England to complete this project.

## **About Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families**

Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families, believes all children should have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life. By researching and evaluating the effectiveness of family support services and interventions, we're generating the actionable evidence needed to improve them, so more vulnerable children can live safely and happily at home with the foundations they need to reach their full potential.



# CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
Enabler: Joining up across family support services .....	10
Enabler: Voluntary and community sector organisations.....	12
Enabler: Senior leadership buy-in.....	16
Enabler: Engaging with marginalised communities .....	18
Enabler: Connecting with community groups.....	20
Enabler: The importance of language.....	22
Enabler: Accessibility of place .....	24
Enabler: Diversity of representation .....	26
References.....	29
Accessibility text .....	30



## Introduction

The Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Programme includes a focus on capturing family voice and lived experience in strategy and service design. The rationale for this is that services will work better when they are co-designed with those involved at the heart of them, in this case, the children, young people and parents who may have experienced parental conflict.

Analysis of round 4 of the RPC Planning Tool indicated that local areas are less mature in the Community key element – which includes involving families in service planning – when compared with other key elements, suggesting that local areas have struggled to make progress here.

As a result, Foundations has explored what works well for local leaders in involving families in RPC service planning, and how they have overcome challenges. We held four online discussions in January 2024 to gather perspectives from local RPC Leads on their experiences of engaging families in RPC service planning. We then followed up in more detail with local RPC leaders who shared practical examples of overcoming challenges and amplifying enablers. This report summarises what we heard from local areas on how to take this agenda forward.

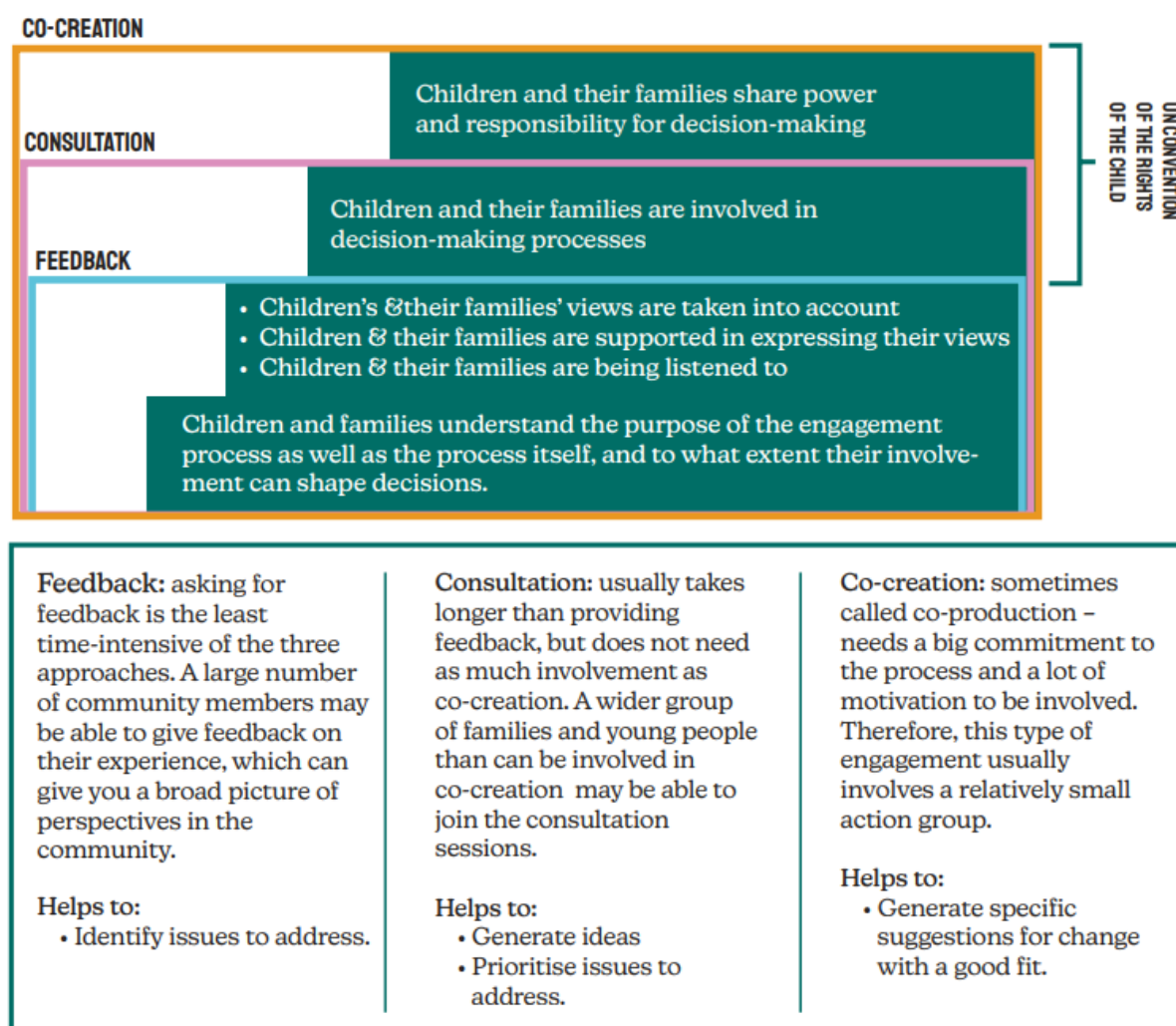
## Definitions

There are a range of ways that families can be involved with service planning and design. We use the term in this report to describe any ways that parents or children and young people are involved with discussing how RPC services work, what their experiences have been, how services could be improved and what they would like to see in the future.

The [RPC Planning Tool](#) discusses community engagement in the context of local RPC activity. The image below sets out the three different levels of engagement with children and families



**Figure 1: Pathways to participation and the three approaches to meaningful engagement** ([go to accessibility text](#))



Consultation and engagement could lead to more close involvement that could be described as co-production. Co-production is considered to be the gold standard (Goulart & Falanga, 2022) when it comes to involving families, for example, Arnstein's ladder of co-production which describes moving from doing *to* families, to doing *with* families. In the context of improving public services, we may define co-production as an equal relationship between the children and families who use services and the people who are responsible for delivering the services. (Boyle & Harris, 2009).

It should be noted that this project focuses specifically on family involvement in RPC service planning. It is less to do with involving or engaging families with RPC activity more generally, such as for example, raising awareness of what parental conflict is or encouraging families who have experienced it to take up support. While there are parallels between the two, there are also differences, such as for example it being difficult to involve families in RPC service planning if they



have not previously received support for parental conflict. The barriers and enablers explored in this project are about how to capture family voice and their involvement in service design specifically.

“In Bristol there is a monthly coffee morning for parents who have done the parenting programmes through Bristol Council and have benefited from it. They can share their voice and contribute towards the development of the programme.

Some of them have become parent trainers too and facilitate some of those groups. This is a good opportunity to start getting that participation. It’s important to me and my service, as service users’ views on what we are delivering for them will ensure that we are meeting their needs and not just our perception of their needs.”

– RPC Coordinator, Bristol

## Enablers for local practice

There are multiple factors which influence involving families in RPC service planning, including the family perspective, barriers and enablers at individual, national and local system levels, and considerations related to equality, diversity, inclusion and equity (EDIE):

- Individual level: factors such as skills, knowledge and motivation of local staff such as RPC Co-ordinators, SPOC’s and practitioners working with families.
- Local system level: group factors that affect multiple individuals in the local area. For example, this could include factors like the organisational culture, senior leadership and ways of working.
- National system level: factors outside of the control of the local area. This could include issues relating to central government funding and national RPC policy.
- Family level: factors that impact families who have experienced parental conflict. Participants were asked to think from the perspective of these families on which factors might make it easier or harder to engage in service planning design. For example, this could include the need to cover childcare costs or stigma towards local children’s services.

A key underpinning challenge identified throughout our conversations with local RPC Co-ordinators was that, despite high levels of motivation and skill in involving families in RPC service planning, involvement was often limited to informal consultation due to insufficient capacity and competing priorities.

This report focusses on the individual and local system level enablers. We will explore examples of how local RPC leaders have amplified enablers and are working to overcome barriers in local practice.



**Look out for the step symbol ↗** which can help guide you to take initial steps towards progress in that enabler. The enablers and steps are summarised in the Key Enablers Table below and you can click to move through the document easily to those you are most interested in



	<b>Key enablers</b>	<b>Case example</b>	<b>First step</b>
<b>Joining up across family support services</b>	Joining up with other parts of the family support system where parents are already involved in decision making	Developing parent/carer panel as a mechanism to influence service planning <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Local RPC leaders could look to the list within the case example and existing relationships within their local context to enable that join up across the local system
<b>Voluntary and community sector organisations</b>	Joining up with voluntary and community sector organisations enables RPC Co-ordinators and SPOC's to involve families in RPC service planning	Maximising the potential of community groups <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>  Experts by experience parental group <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Reaching out to community group leaders and exploring how you can support them and how they can support you is a good first step. It's important to find the common ground as engagement needs to be meaningful for both parties and have mutual value
<b>Senior leadership buy-in</b>	Securing senior leadership buy-in to involving families in RPC service planning has the potential to overcome blockages within the system	The importance of securing senior strategic buy-in <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Consider attending an Early Help Partnership Board meeting. This RPC Co-ordinator attended the first few meetings as an observer, then after asked if they could present about the RPC agenda at one of the meetings
<b>Engaging with marginalised communities</b>	Building trusting relationships with marginalised communities to involve in service planning can take additional time and resource	Service and Community Mapping <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>  Linking with the Refugee & Resettlement Service <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Get to know your community and understand your population needs assessment. When you can match these and explore the places families use and trust, you can begin to make links to reach communities in their trusted places





Key enablers		Case example	First step
<b>Connecting with community groups</b>	Building connections with wider community groups is essential to understanding needs to engage diverse communities in service planning	Harnessing parent peer support <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Seek feedback on the resources parents have used after completing a course, what they have found useful and what they have not found useful. This is sometimes in the form of surveys and others in the form of short in-person interviews.
<b>The importance of language</b>	Being mindful of the stigma created by the language of parental conflict	Collecting and incorporating feedback <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Describing what parental conflict is in a meaningful, accessible way can reduce stigma and support families to access services
<b>Accessibility of place</b>	Adapting access to services to meet family needs contributes to more meaningful and accessible involvement in service planning	Engaging with families in the community <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Go to families, open the conversation, ask and listen to their needs
<b>Diversity of representation</b>	Diverse representation of families engaged in service planning activities and across the wider RPC workforce is key to effectiveness	Meeting families in the community and joined up working <a href="#">[GO TO]</a>	Considering local recruitment policies and building relationships within local communities can increase accessibility of services to families



## Enabler: Joining up across family support services

Joining up with other parts of the family support system where parents are already involved in decision making.

Many RPC Co-ordinators and SPOCs have the ambition to join up with other areas of a local system for example Family Hubs – as a useful point of access for family involvement in RPC service planning. The analysis of round 4 of the RPC Planning Tool showed that local areas felt Family Hubs offered a vehicle for change. For example, Parent-Carer Panels in Family Hubs offer an existing group of parents who are already engaged with a local service and could also be invited to engage on services around RPC. It was heard that integration of RPC across the local system would act as a powerful enabler for RPC.

“We've already got... statutory parent-carer panels. So, I certainly don't want another one, but I would have integrated RPC in the Family Hub programme more. It kind of needs to be, I think, very much just built into the same model.”

– RPC Policy and Development Manager.

Other examples cited by participants besides integration with Family Hubs included the following:

- Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) services
- Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnerships (MVPs/MNVPs)
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS)
- Children's Centres and Baby Hubs
- Refugee and Resettlement Services.

↗ As a first step, local RPC leaders could look to this list and existing relationships within their local context to enable that join up across the local system.

One local Family Participation Manager discussed using 'independent co-ordinators' to more successfully reach out to families. These were individuals offering support, guidance and advocacy to navigate home and community-based services.

“So, we've used one of our independent co-ordinators to recruit some of the parents into our group. I think if I'd gone straight out, called them said do you want to be in our group? They just probably would have said no because I'm a social care manager. But it was like a bridge bringing them in.”

– Family Participation Manager



## CASE EXAMPLE

### **Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), Developing parent/carer panel as a mechanism to influence service planning**

In the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), decisions about the development of the Reducing Parental Conflict service are informed by a newly developed Parent Carer panel. This panel enables RBKC to obtain views and feedback on what parents think about service strengths and what could improve.

To run the parent-carer panel meaningfully and to be able to engage different kinds of families, RBKC reports that a full-time parent engagement officer is required. The more time and dedication given to the service the more likely they will be able to reach the needs of a more diverse group of parents. This includes parents that typically can't attend the parent carer group, including fathers, parents of older children, and parents that work during core hours. To reach these groups RBKC use creative strategies to continuously promote the service:

“We want the views of all parents, those who work those who don't, those who are separated, ethnically diverse. Therefore, we need to be flexible and host the sessions at different times of the week and at the weekends. It can't be the 9-5 hours only.”

– North Area Hubs Manger

- Promoting the service at multi-agency panels or team meetings and engaging with parents at community groups including coffee mornings, father's groups, and 'stay and play' sessions. RBKC keep the promotion of the group going, even during holidays when parents are less available, to ensure the group stays in parents' minds.

RBKC also ask parents involved in the parent carer panel to spread the word by giving them the leaflets, asking them to talk to their friends. This provides parents with the opportunity to have some ownership over the recruitment themselves so it's not just coming from the local authority.



## Enabler: Voluntary and community sector organisations

Joining up with voluntary and community sector organisations enables RPC Co-ordinators and SPOCs to involve families in RPC service planning.

As well as joining up with other services within the local authority, many leaders discussed the benefits of linking up with the voluntary sector and community organisations. This included community collectives, housing associations and faith groups. Linking up with these organisations was seen as beneficial for two reasons: firstly, it helped to build capacity within the community and alleviate capacity issues with RPC Co-ordinators; secondly, participants felt that voluntary sector organisations do not carry the same preconceptions or ‘stigma’ for parents as local family services. These views centered around ideas of ‘epistemic trust’, whereby families are more amenable to being engaged in activities when introduced by somebody they already have a positive and trusting relationship with. As a result of established trusting relationships, voluntary and community sector organisations are also able to communicate reducing parental conflict in a way that is meaningful and accessible to a particular community.

### CASE EXAMPLE

#### **Stockport: Maximising the potential of community groups**

Stockport are steadily making progress to involve families in RPC service planning by creating strong links with established local community groups. This method of engagement is valuable as local community groups already have trusted relationships with families and can communicate the RPC support offer, as well as opportunities to be involved in RPC service planning.

Stockport are committed to hearing from families representing the demographics of the wider borough and these connections enable RPC leaders to hear from a more diverse range of parents. For example, Stockport engaged community leaders from a culturally diverse community group, and over one year they built enough trust to engage the parents in the group, as well as hear and respond to their concerns, which was crucial to their RPC service planning.

In addition, Stockport have developed trusted relationships with a VCS SEND borough wide group. As a result, the group are now linked in with Health Visiting and Start Well and have supported the development of the local SEND pathways. Taking the time to invest time in relationship building here has been key.

- Reaching out to community group leaders and exploring how you can support them and how they can support you is a good first step. It's important to find the common ground as engagement needs to be meaningful for both parties and have mutual value. This could be, for example, a specific service attending the group at an agreed regularity. It's important to create a manageable relationship from the start by agreeing the benefits, considering the



challenges or barriers and discussing regularity of contact from the beginning. Having key contacts and being open and honest when people are moving on is also essential.

Stockport have also been building a relationship with a local mother and baby group called 'Pram Pushers'. This group offers peer support for families with babies under 12 months old in Stockport. This links well with their focus as a local authority around the 1001 critical days.

“We’ve got a group that runs called Pram pushers and this is a lady who does voluntary work with mums of new babies, and she literally sees more families in a week than we probably see as a service. It's a really trusted place to go. It's word of mouth, peer support, I think peer support is the key thing, peer support.”

Building these trusted relationships with community leaders in groups such as the Pram pushers enables a flow of communication from the local authority about RPC services to families. This communication mechanism also ensures information can come back into the service to influence service design, updates and delivery.

Stockport report that investing in community relationships over time has helped develop strong, trusting relationships with community groups. This has in turn supported RPC leaders to access the authentic voices of families, which has directly influenced RPC service planning.

“Key community people can be your biggest asset. We can't rest on easy wins; we need to be innovative and think outside the box.”

– Local RPC Leader, Stockport

## CASE EXAMPLE

### **Tower Hamlets: Experts by experience parental group**

Tower Hamlets used independent Family Group Conference (FGC) coordinators and advocates alongside independent Single Point of Contact (SPOC) to establish a group of parents who are experts by experience. Independent professionals served as a bridge between the local authority and families, helping to build trust in the system and encourage positive engagement.

In 2021 Tower Hamlets Family Participation Service were asked to develop mediation for parents in harmful conflict as part of the Reducing Parental Conflict offer. The service provides a holistic, strengths-based approach to empowering children and families in decision-making for their children.

Tower Hamlets are committed to ensuring that families with lived experience inform their work and are given power in decision making. They developed the 'Family Group Experts' group to contribute to the design and delivery of the Family Participation Service and indeed all Children's Services in Tower Hamlets.



➤ To support the initial engagement with families, independent FGC coordinators contacted families they knew to ask if they were interested in being involved. This process proved successful as they had already built a relationship of trust with their coordinator who was independent from the local authority. Due to this, the first meeting was positive, and Tower Hamlets hosted six family members alongside their trusted FGC coordinator.

The second session, however, was not as well attended and Tower Hamlets realised that family members required more support to help build trust in the service and engage. Through independent coordinators they spoke with families and consulted around the barriers to their attendance. These barriers were mainly around lack of confidence and lack of trust in services, as well as the timings of the sessions and practical arrangements.

The timings of the sessions really mattered, some people didn't have English as a first language and needed an interpreter in the meeting supporting them.

“Family members need a lot of support to do this sort of thing. I mean in terms of practicalities. We can't just expect them to turn up. They still needed some encouragement to come along. It was quite a big deal for them to turn up and one or two suffered with a lot of anxiety.”

– Family Participation Service Manager

It was through this learning that Tower Hamlets decided to appoint an independent Single Point of Contact (SPOC) to liaise with families and coordinate arrangements. The SPOC was vital to the process to coordinate the sessions and provide initial emotional support to help build confidence of the family members and trust in the process.

“Involving families in service planning requires dedication and focus, and it must take place in a safe and well organised setting.”

– Family Participation Service Manager

Once the families felt comfortable in their role the SPOC and the coordinators took a step back, and the Family Participation Service Manager continued her involvement and took on the lead. The 'Family Group Experts' has gone from strength to strength and have advised on a number of areas including:

- Consultation on 'Better Together' restorative practice framework
- Providing expert input into All-Staff conference on 'Neglect' and their experiences of receiving social work services where neglect was identified as a concern
- Key-note speakers at events, local, national and international
- Live presentation at World Social Workday with Tower Hamlets Social Workers
- Input into Domestic violence and abuse strategy
- Involvement in interviews for ASYEs.

The Director of Children's Services has supported the group from the outset, including welcoming them to the first session. Although the implementation of the Family Group Experts group has



been successful, Tower Hamlets report that the process has not been straightforward, and they were initially lacking in confidence. Working alongside an independent group organiser has allowed Tower Hamlets to meaningfully and safely engage with families.



## Enabler: Senior leadership buy-in

Senior leadership buy-in to involving families in RPC service planning has the potential to overcome blockages within the system.

Many local RPC leaders recognised the strong influence that senior buy in can have on the opportunity to involve families in service planning. Those who experienced this senior buy in shared that this proved to be a strong enabler to involving families as it became an expectation and enabled them the time and space to do so. Many have developed strategies to keep senior leaders updated and involved in RPC locally to maintain that local focus and working towards integration.

### CASE EXAMPLE

#### **Bracknell Forest: The importance of securing senior strategic buy-in**

Bracknell Forrest have worked on ensuring senior strategic buy-in for involving families in RPC service planning because without this it can be very difficult to ensure that the expectation for engaging families in RPC service design is incorporated across the service. Without senior buy-in, it becomes very challenging to join up with other parts of the service to seek the views of parents, even within Early Help. It is crucial to reach out to parents where they are already engaging, where they are already connected. The risk is that a wide range of parents are not being reached, which can make it very challenging to involve them in service planning.

Without senior buy-in this, it becomes even harder to involve families in RPC service planning. When RPC Co-ordinators are fairly junior in comparison to others in the service, they may not be invited to the meetings where decisions are being made. Trying to email and convince people ‘from the sidelines’ can be very challenging.

↗ The first step in this case was attending an Early Help Partnership Board meeting. The RPC Co-Ordinator attended the first few meetings as an observer, after which they asked if they could present on the RPC agenda and the impact of involving families in service design at one of the meetings. Prior to this, the RPC Co-ordinator had been reaching out across the early help service with minimal response. At the presentation, the Assistant Director of the service was there and championed this RPC agenda, suggesting that all the middle managers get in touch with the RPC Co-ordinator to discuss potential join up around involving families which then happened.

“I think that unless we can push above the assistant director level and right up into the director level/ chief executive level, there’s so many people that we need to reach that we’re not getting to.”

The RPC Co-ordinator was able to replicate this approach with GPs by taking the first step of ‘inviting themselves along’ to a meeting.





One piece of advice for other local areas was ‘always push on an open door. If you hear about meetings happening on the grapevine, just ask to go along’. The other piece of advice would be, ‘don’t give up with schools. Schools can provide a useful entry point to parents and teachers may already have been informed about or be aware of issues like parental conflict at home.

The leader in this case urges that in an ideal world, there would be more information flowing from DWP to Chief Executives. This is so that all the information does not just have to come from ‘below’ (i.e. the RPC Co-ordinators).



## Enabler: Engaging with marginalised communities

Building trusting relationships with marginalised communities to involve in service planning can take additional time and resource.

Local leaders value and recognise the need for increasing the diversity of families involved in service planning activities. It was recognised that to establish rapport and trust with families from specific marginalised communities generally is more time consuming given the additional challenges families face and increased distrust with social care services. Whilst practitioners recommended providing translator services to enable minoritised ethnic families who have English as their second language to take part in service planning activities, participants highlighted the logistical challenges of coordinating services which can be time consuming and acts as a barrier to meaningfully engaging these groups. Those who are working to overcome these barriers have found engagement opportunities which highlight the importance of place, relationships and trust.

“I've linked with an organisation, and they support like the Somalian, Pakistan, Pakistani and Polish communities and it's really been helpful having a trusted professional from the community that we want to engage...that authentic voice from their community that they trust, and [we] managed to get a couple of parents for participation through that channel.”

– Parental Relationship Practitioner

### CASE EXAMPLE

#### **Service and community mapping**

In the pursuit to enhance family engagement and access as part of the development of their new Family Hub, one local area conducted a comprehensive service mapping exercise. The goal was to identify and leverage local services, including voluntary sector organisations, community groups and spaces to foster more meaningful connections with families to build trust to involve them in RPC service planning.

Local barber shops were approached as part of this exercise and recognising these establishments as informal and trusted spaces for families, the local area saw an opportunity to bridge the gap between service providers and fathers, who are often underrepresented in RPC engagement activities. Through discussions, it was identified that one barber shop hosted a successful podcast and had a strong social media presence. Working collaboratively with the local area, the barber shop owner became a key figure in encouraging families to take part in service planning activities by utilising his shop and social media platforms to spread awareness and encourage participation in parent carer panels.

**Source: Online Discussion Group 3**



- Get to know the demographics of your local community and map this against the organisations, groups, community settings that families use and trust. This creates part of your local population needs assessment. When you can match these and explore the places families use and trust, you can begin to make links to reach communities in their trusted places.

## CASE EXAMPLE

### **Devon: Linking with the Refugee and Resettlement Service**

Devon is striving to get feedback from minoritised ethnic families by linking up with the Refugee and Resettlement Service. Involving minoritised ethnic families in RPC service planning is an area that many local areas find tricky. Barriers reported often include needing increased time to make connections, language barriers, cultural barriers, and trust.

By linking up, the RPC team and Refugee and Resettlement team were able to identify that there are often cases where RPC tools are not appropriate to be used directly with families, and first need some tailoring or adaptation to make them accessible. Time and trust with a family are imperative to helping them make full use of RPC support and gain confidence to feedback to influence service planning. Through building relationships with the Refugee and Resettlement Service this enabled more trusted connections to be made with other key contacts in the community such as voluntary organisations that support refugees. This directory of key contacts can provide a useful starting point for RPC teams who have report that there are challenges in getting access to gatekeepers or first points of contact in the community.

Actions needed to establish the connection between RPC and the Refugee and Resettlement service involved the RPC Coordinator contacting a manager within the Refugee and Resettlement Service and offering to train their practitioners in RPC. This helped to secure buy-in and ensured those on the training course were motivated to take part. Through highlighting the benefits of working together the Refugee and Resettlement Team were keen to be involved to support the families they serve and promote the views of the families they work with to influence service planning.

- When trying to engage families in RPC service planning it is important to think creatively to build the relationship and the trust needed to facilitate feedback. For example, this might involve encouraging families to bring food or drinks with them from their respective home countries and accepting that the first few sessions might take longer than usual. These extra efforts can help to create a more culturally supportive model for families involved with RPC.



## Enabler: Connecting with community groups

Building connections with wider community groups is essential to understanding needs to engage diverse communities in service planning.

The involvement of parent and carer champions and peer facilitators can be pivotal in fostering family engagement in RPC service planning. Local leaders shared that parents played a central role in directing community members towards RPC services and facilitating some programmes available through the offer. These activities were perceived as crucial not only for involving families in broader RPC initiatives, but also for empowering parents to be involved in service planning.

Parent and carer champions often served as trusted figures within their local community and were reported to effectively connect families to services and lessen the stigma associated with seeking support. Further, the peer delivery of training programmes served as a catalyst for empowering parents to become involved in service planning, as it demonstrated the value placed on lived experience and provided safe spaces where people could share their views and feel that they were acted upon. Local leaders recognised that they had some way to go in cultivating a better infrastructure to support lived experience led support and make it more sustainable for parents, such as providing appropriate payment for their time and structured training for parent facilitators.

### CASE EXAMPLE

#### **Nottinghamshire: Harnessing parent peer support**

Nottinghamshire Council gathered feedback from parents who previously engaged with the reducing parental conflict service and used this information to inform and influence future interventions. Some of these parents went on to promote and share information with other parents through community-led organisations. This engagement method (experts by experience) proved more effective than having someone from the local authority promoting the service and enabled the voices of families to be heard regarding RPC service design.

As part of this approach, a parent recorded a video of their thoughts about being part of an RPC course, including what it entailed and what it meant for them, which was then shared on the website. This example of involving parent feedback when advertising the service had useful benefits. The RPC Co-ordinator felt it was more persuasive when it came from a place of authenticity. For example, they included a quote from a father who had at first been reluctant to take part in RPC support. When parents first hear the term 'parental conflict' it is natural for them to try to distance themselves from it or become defensive. Therefore, having a father who had started with the same perspective and then eventually finding the service very useful was a good example to share with other prospective parents.

Nottingham had some challenges with this approach, although some parents were happy to share their experiences on camera, some did not feel comfortable being recorded. To mitigate this, it was



agreed that a staff member would read out their views so they themselves did not need to be recorded.

The RPC service in Nottinghamshire faces barriers to involving families in RPC service planning due to limited time and resources and that providing a small snapshot is often the best they can do in the short time they have. This may help to encourage other Local Areas to do the same.

In the future Nottinghamshire are hoping to set up a parent carer panel which would allow parents to provide peer support for each other, as well as provide feedback on the services they had received.

- ↗ Tips for building trust with parents who are sharing their views in video format:
- Ensure that the same member of staff is engaging the family throughout their involvement in sharing their views. provide feedback throughout the process- don't ask parents to record their views and then have no further interactions with them
  - Provide options for parents who may not wish to appear on camera
  - Be flexible- offer to record the video at a time that works for parents (for example, after their children have gone to bed in the evening).



## Enabler: The importance of language

Be mindful about the use of language around parental conflict.

Local RPC leaders shared a variety of ways in which they have reframed language around parental conflict to make this more user friendly to encourage involvement of families in RPC service design. It was thought that changing language to be more strengths-based can lessen the stigma and guilt about being involved in services and removes an element of blame that may be associated with parental conflict. For example, this can be seen in how some LAs have changed names of RPC services (such as ‘Healthy Relationships’) and subsequently job role titles (such as ‘Healthy Relationships Co-ordinator’). Language that focused on strengthening parental relationships, with emphasis on improving relationship quality and co-parenting was perceived to have greater resonance and acceptability with families.

### **CASE EXAMPLE:**

#### **Warwickshire, collecting and incorporating feedback**

Warwickshire utilised feedback from parents that showed the language of ‘parental conflict’ was unhelpful and could be a barrier when it comes to involving families in RPC service planning. Parents found this term made them feel defensive or felt that it did not apply to them.

Warwickshire decided to change the name of their RPC services and resources to ‘Family Relationship Support’. They found that parents who attended some of their other courses within the service, such as parenting courses, became more interested in RPC work when it was described as ‘relationships matter’ rather than ‘parental conflict’. Acting on this feedback has meant that Warwickshire can reach more parents. For example, parents who sign up for a Parenting Together course can then be informed about the Family Relationship Support offer, which sounds far more friendly and relevant than a ‘parental conflict’ course.

Schools had also reported that during RPC training, the language of parental conflict did not work for them as they work with some families that this would be too triggering for.

As well as changing the language around parental conflict, Warwickshire developed an animated video with the child’s voice, describing what parental conflict is which helps to engage parents and encourages them to provide feedback. In turn these changes have enabled leaders to involve a wider array of families in conversations around RPC service planning.

Warwickshire have worked to embed the RPC agenda right the way across the service so that when parents were referred to different parts of the service e.g. social care or elsewhere, practitioners could offer them RPC services and describe to parents the value of this and how their opinions would be sought to influence service design.



Practical steps that Warwickshire took included:

- Weekly online surveys from families receiving RPC support
- Verbal feedback as well as written feedback
- ‘Feeding back on the feedback’ – each week, practitioners would let parents know when they were actioning their feedback and telling them how it would be used and impact on the development of the RPC offer
- Other feedback would be collected from surveys put into existing newsletters, for example, their Family Information Service which go out to over 10,000 people. This might ask questions such as ‘what time of the day works best for you?’, ‘what day of the week works best for you?’ ‘Would you be interested in a Saturday morning programme’. ‘This will help us shape our delivery’. This feedback is then reviewed on a half-termly basis.



- To help with response rates, inform families that they would be asked for feedback right from the start
- The shorter the questions the better. This LA generally tries to keep response times down to two minutes
- QR codes can work very well. If face to face, a practitioner would print out the QR code and stick it to the table
- Tell parents how important their feedback is to improving the service
- Share snippets or quotes from parents when advertising the service this is a direct way of using the feedback.



## Enabler: Accessibility of place

Adapting to family needs contributes to more meaningful and accessible involvement in service planning.

Many leaders emphasised the importance of understanding the individual needs of families and working flexibly to accommodate these to facilitate family engagement in service planning activities. Some examples centred on practical considerations around when families could be available and childcare responsibilities that may prevent them from taking part in activities. Participants suggested having increased flexibility around when and how service planning involvement activities are delivered, such as delivering sessions on evenings or weekends, offering both in person and online sessions and considering childcare provision.

“That's why like it's good to offer that flexibility. So, it's like, oh, we'll do a video call when works best for you around your schedule or if it's easier. If I can't, we come in person. There's two of us. You know, my colleague could keep an eye out on the little one just kind of things like that to make it more family friendly and meet them where they're at.”

– Parental Relationship Practitioner

“They don't know me from Adam. So, having the support of those [community] organisations, the trust of those organisations being able to use their venues to have some of those meetings which are a comfortable space I think is really, really important and removes a lot of those barriers of suspicion about, well, who are you? Why should I talk to you? What is it you're going to do with this anyway? Because that trust is already within those community groups.”

– RPC Co-ordinator

## CASE EXAMPLE

### **Act for Change (voluntary sector): Engaging with families in the community**

Act for Change receive funding from DWP for work around Reducing Parental Conflict. They also received a small separate amount of funding for reaching out in the community.

Act for Change have a workforce that goes out into the community to meet families where they're at and to try to get them enrolled onto courses about parental conflict and feed views back to influence service design where appropriate. The point is to access places that are already connected with families: “we need to go to the places that are connecting with them anyway.” As well as this, the workforce is skilled at facilitating conversations with parents and families about what they need and offering a bespoke option. These are referred to as Deep Democracy Forums.





Areas in the community can include GP surgeries, health visitors, early intervention places, schools, faith groups and housing associations. Another focus would be citizens advice bureaus (although this has not already been done yet). It takes time to build up trust and can be a slow process. The reason why families agree to participate and share views with Act for Change is because they already have a connection with the GP, school, Church and trust them: “we’re riding on the relationships that are already in place”.

Act for Change suggest going beyond those families who have been through an RPC support service when asking for views on how to improve RPC services as this rules out important information you might be able to get from families about what they feel like they need or what they want before joining a support service:

“The first step is to go to them, open a conversation and listen to them: ‘we’re not there to sell our wares’. We say that we’d like to open a forum and are interested to hear about them and about what they need. We’ll then take our key messages and package them in some of the language they’ve used with us. It gives people the opportunity to be heard and to have the sense that they are being heard and then get the skills that they require to meet their need. One example of the impact this has had is that the language was changed to connecting families rather than parental conflict because as this was more relatable for families.”

- ↗ Identify opportunities to talk to all families in the community, not just those that have accessed interventions. Open the conversation around reducing parental conflict, ask and listen to families about their needs.



## Enabler: Diversity of representation

Diverse representation of families engaged in service planning activities and across the wider RPC workforce is key to effectiveness.

A narrow band of representation in relation to the types of families that become involved in service planning activities was frequently reported by local RPC leaders. This means that the views and voices that are involved in shaping the planning and delivery of RPC services are not necessarily representative of the range of families that access these services, something which is often the case in wider service provision. Many reflected on the challenges in engaging specific groups in RPC service planning, particularly fathers, in line with the wider literature which there are barriers to engaging men and fathers in relationship support provision. Many are also working on overcoming challenges when involving families from minoritised ethnic communities in service planning. Some participants felt that these challenges may be related to marginalised groups feeling less empowered in relation to self-efficacy.

“But I think sometimes we like to speak to other males. We've got a lot of volunteers within [local area], a massive volunteer sector. And they're far happier talking to other males, and that's going to be a really big issue because we haven't got enough male workers to go around.”

– RPC Champion Lead

“Quite a few practitioners in [LA] as well have Urdu as either an additional language or their first language. So, it's not necessarily needing an interpreter because those staff are able to speak multiple languages, which is really, really helpful. So, they'll be looking at kind of putting that entire workshop into Urdu and then having a group that wants to engage in that, which is really great for us basically.”

– RPC Co-ordinator

- Reflect on the demography and skills of the existing workforce, and consider how to utilise these skills to engage families. Building relationships with local communities can increase accessibility of services to families.



## CASE EXAMPLE

### **Luton, Central Bedfordshire: Meeting families in the community and joined-up working**

Although central Bedfordshire is a merged local authority with Luton, the two areas operate differently in terms of children's services and structure. For example, one is a Family Hubs area while one is not. Luton are trying to reach families from a diverse range of backgrounds by engaging with relevant local services or programmes that have a diverse workforce and range of languages spoken.

In Luton's Early Years service there is a programme called [Flying Start](#). Flying Start is a partnership approach to the delivery of services for families in Luton, with a focus on the antenatal period and the early years. Specifically, it aims to deliver a core offer of evidence and science-based interventions. This is similar to but not the same as children's centres in Central Bedfordshire.

Around 30 staff from the Flying Start Centres have been trained in reducing parental conflict (termed 'managing healthy relationships' in Luton) by the RPC Co-ordinator. At the centres there are many in the workforce who can already speak Urdu as their first or an additional language. This means support and feedback for parental conflict can be gathered in families first language without the need for an additional translation resources. Doing this helps to address the challenge of gathering feedback from otherwise hard to reach minoritised ethnic families.

To achieve this partnership, the RPC team utilised links with other elements of the service such as the Family Partnerships Service and sought to gain meetings with senior leaders in. Eventually, a senior contact was found with links to the Flying Start Centres and the RPC team were invited to deliver training to their workforce. Having a Steering Group that contains representatives from reducing parental conflict and other elements of children's services was also a useful way to establish these links.

- Another tip would be utilising contacts from existing steering groups to help find other relevant contacts in the community, for example, faith leaders, who could then help to reach families from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.



## Conclusion

Local RPC leaders are passionate and innovative in the ways they are navigating their local contexts to involve families in service planning and design.

According to RPC Planning Tool returns, the benefits of engaging with families are recognised by local areas but challenges remain in making this work a priority, with local areas often referring to community engagement as being part of plans for the upcoming year. Many reflect that whilst they do collect data on the experiences of families, this is not routinely used in service development with the focus being on delivery.

The local context of increasing demand for family support, funding pressures and rising costs create a highly challenging environment for delivering sustained change across all elements of the RPC programme, including involving families in service planning.

This report shines a light on some elements of local practice with the ambition of supporting and reinforcing the efforts of local leaders to further engage with families.

Looking for innovative ways to build connections and share learning may mitigate some of these system challenges and harness collaborate and supportive partnerships to drive this work.

Further resources on engaging children and families in local service planning, including in Family Hubs are available here: [Family Hubs Planning Framework](#).



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# APPENDIX A

## Accessibility text

### 1. Figure 1: Pathways to participation and the three approaches to meaningful engagement

#### First level or step: Feedback

- Children's & their families' views are taken into account
- Children & their families are supported in expressing their views.

Children and families understand the purpose of the engagement process as well as the process itself, and to what extent their involvement can shape decisions. Children & their families are being listened to.

#### Second level or step: Consultation (aligns with UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child)

- Children and their families are involved in decision-making processes.

#### Third level or step: Consultation (aligns with UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child)

- Children and their families share power and responsibility for decision-making.

**Feedback:** asking for feedback is the least time-intensive of the three approaches. A large number of community members may be able to give feedback on their experience, which can give you a broad picture of perspectives in the community.

**Feedback helps to:** Identify issues to address.

**Consultation:** usually takes longer than providing feedback but does not need as much involvement as co-creation. A wider group of families and young people than can be involved in co-creation may be able to join the consultation sessions.

**Consultation helps to:** Generate ideas; prioritise issues to address.

**Co-creation:** sometimes called co-production – needs a big commitment to the process and a lot of motivation to be involved. Therefore, this type of engagement usually involves a relatively small action group.

**Co-creation helps to:** Generate specific suggestions for change with a good fit.