

OUR VOICE COUNTS
North Somerset Parent Participation Forum
20th April 2010

Workshop
Social care/short breaks

NOTES

Agenda item: The Buddy Scheme

“The buddy system doesn’t always work for children and their families – could you tell us how families find out about this service, what the criteria are, and what we can expect the service to offer our children?”

Are buddies offered an induction, how are they trained and supported to do this work and develop interesting activities and opportunities for our children? Is this arrangement reviewed regularly? How do parents know what their child’s entitlement is? What back-up can be offered when this service fails to deliver sessions?”

Discussion:

Rosemary Ward, Team Manager and Jan Carver, Volunteer Co-ordinator provided information about the scheme and how it works.

The buddy scheme is essentially a befriending service. In the past families have had to have a social work assessment in order to access a buddy. This has been changed so that access is now easier. Any child who has a Statement of Special Educational Need, a health assessment or CAF which identifies the need for a buddy is eligible for consideration for the buddy scheme.

The scheme is very popular and there is a waiting list. This had been closed but is now open again. The waiting list results from there not being enough buddies. It is not a financial issue – there are just not enough young people, particularly in the Weston-super-Mare area – who want to volunteer to meet the need. Travel and transport issues can present additional barriers to matching a young person to a buddy if they do not live near one another.

The buddy’s role is essentially to befriend and support a child or young person to access social and recreational activities within their local communities. Typically, this covers activities such as going to after school clubs, youth clubs, cubs, scouts, guides, sports clubs etc. Ideally, buddies support young people within established groups and/or structured activities since this provides a safer, more supportive environment for both the buddy and the young person they are befriending.

The buddies are young people who are volunteers. They are not employed but do receive a payment of £5.50 per hour to cover their expenses.

The buddies are initially recruited to support the specialist play schemes. Recruitment takes place via presentations at local schools to Year 10 assemblies. Last year 200 young people responded.

The recruitment process involves interviews, taking up references and a CRB check.

The buddies receive training in safer care, child protection, confidentiality and play skills. They initially work within settings where they can be supported and supervised and develop their confidence and understanding e.g. Saturday Club, After School Club.

Buddies who then want to work individually are carefully matched to children and young people who want a buddy. This involves matching their interests and location and can mean that buddies are not always allocated to those who have waited longest for the service. An initial supervised introduction takes place and the arrangements are followed up informally by the volunteer co-ordinator to check things are working well. There are also regular formal reviews on an annual basis.

The scheme provides a positive experience for those who use the scheme and for the buddies themselves.

The buddies' circumstances often change during the time they are involved with the scheme and exam pressures and moves to college and university can sometimes disrupt their involvement. The consistency of the scheme is important but it is recognised that the needs and interests of the young people who act as buddies change over time. When a placement comes to an end it is not always possible to provide an alternative buddy immediately and given that the scheme operates on a voluntary basis cover cannot be provided if a buddy is unable to deliver sessions.

General Discussion:

About half of the parents in the group had experience of using the buddy scheme. They were generally very positive about it and its benefits. It can initially be hard for parents to trust the service and have confidence in the buddies but those who had used the scheme felt it had enabled their children to benefit from attending clubs and new activities.

“I've been really impressed”

“I felt very confident”

One parent had experienced difficulties with one buddy, which highlighted the need for parents to let the volunteer co-ordinator know when things are not working well.

When a buddy leaves the scheme it can be very difficult for a child to understand that this person would no longer be a part of their life.

These situations had highlighted the need for regular reviews and contact between families and the scheme and the system has now changed to formalise this.

Parents and professionals agreed that responsibility for sharing concerns and highlighting potential difficulties is a shared one and that communication needs to be a two way process.

The waiting list is reviewed every 6 months and all those on it are contacted by letter to ask if they wish to remain on it. Responses to this are often relatively poor. Some parents felt that a phone call might be an easier way of dealing with this.

Professionals stressed that they try hard to be fair when allocating buddies but parents need to understand that the successful placements rely on the best match between the child and the buddy and not the length of time a family has been waiting. Parents had mixed views about being on a waiting list but generally felt that the list should never be closed. Some had been on the waiting list for a considerable time and felt this demoralising. Generally, the consensus was that the waiting list should be kept open and up to date to demonstrate the continuing and growing need for the service. Closing the waiting list was seen as a deterrent to families requesting the service.

It was stressed that it is only the lack of sufficient young people wanting to become volunteers that causes there to be a waiting list.

Action point: Parents and professionals to take shared responsibility for exchanging information to ensure that waiting list remains up to date and changes in circumstances are notified

Agenda item: Finding out about services

“Families struggle to find out what services are available, how to find out how to access them and what the criteria are. How do you find out if you are entitled to services for your child and family? Are there any plans to provide an accessible and freely available information pack to families that would make the range of provision transparent? Is there a key worker system to support families through this maze?”

Discussion:

Parents shared their desire that it should be easier to find out about what services are available and how to access them. Some felt that they had to “jump through hoops” and sometimes had to “justify themselves” when they felt desperate for help. Some felt that things had improved and were continuing to improve in this area and felt positive about progress.

Professionals acknowledged the difficulties families can face in finding out about services. The Family Information Resource Room at The Firs contains information on a wide range of services, groups and organisations and is regularly updated by staff. It is not as well used by

parents as perhaps it could be. Any information received by the team is placed in the room and notice boards are regularly updated about current events and activities.

The team sends out regular mailings to parents detailing the holiday activities that are planned and the age groups that these are targeted at so that parents can identify potentially suitable activities with their children.

Parents often found out about services and groups informally, often by word of mouth and/or via support groups and this was seen as a very effective way of getting information by those involved. The difficulties for those parents without these links and networks were acknowledged.

Action point:

Further work to be undertaken to explore ways to make the Resources Room at the Firs and its equivalent on the north at St Barnabas become focal points for information and increase usage, including possibility that Parent Forum Steering Group meetings be held at these venues

There are no plans at present to produce an Information Booklets/Pack although the possibility was not discounted. Discussions explored various potential ways in which information could be made more readily available including Information Packs and booklets (although it was acknowledged that these can quickly become out of date), and more accessible information on the web.

Some parents felt that information should be provided at the time of a child's diagnosis but others felt this might run the risk of "information overload" at a time when parents may be trying to come to terms with a diagnosis and its potential implications.

It was felt that GPs and schools could play a greater role in providing information and signposting to services.

There is no formalised key worker system as such but parents felt that such a system would be helpful. Discussion explored how some existing workers/roles had the potential to act as focal points for providing information which could be explored further e.g. health visitors and support workers within schools.

The Team reported receiving more referrals recently from Health Visitors. Rosemary reported that the PCT and social care recognise the importance of providing support and information at the point of discharge from hospital and are actively discussing ways to address this.

Agenda item: The Specialist Play schemes

"Some parents of children with complex additional needs do not use the specialist play schemes, as they consider that they do not meet their child's individual preferences or needs. Their child's challenging

behaviour, age or higher functioning makes current provision insufficient or inappropriate. Will families who do not access the current range of provision be invited into the planning process, so that the new Firs development planned in Portishead takes these children into account?"

Discussion:

Gill Stokes and Charlotte Shelton, Day Care Co-ordinators, explained that the play schemes meet the needs of many children and young people and the feedback from those using them is very positive. The schemes offer a structured environment which many children need and they adapt and change according to the needs of those using them. However, they are aware that schemes do not meet the needs of all children and young people and the team have begun to explore alternative, more appropriate provision for some young people.

The recent Barton Camp residential activities for young males with high functioning autism had been really successful as had weekends at Centreparks and there are plans to repeat these activities.

Parents who had been involved in these activities, particularly the Barton Camp were extremely positive about them - "the best week of our lives"

Action point: A Steering Group for the Firs to be re- established and one for the St Barnabas Centre to be set up. Each to fully involve parents and explore issues in relation to providing information, raising the profiles of each centre as well as being involved in developing the provision within them. All parents to be invited to become involved. Gill and Charlotte will make contact and convene initial meetings.

Agenda item: Service Planning

Families want to contribute directly to service planning. How can this be established? Working group suggestions: Firs Resource Centre Steering Group – AHDC Scrutiny Group

Action point: As above.

Sally Davis
28th April 2010