

Effective Practice case study: developing strategic co-production through the Wiltshire Parent Carer Council (WPCC)

Summary

The Wiltshire Parent Carer Council (WPCC) was formed in 2008, in recognition of both the opportunity and need to strengthen partnership working between parents / carers of young people with SEND and the leaders of local SEND services in Wiltshire. Fifteen years later, WPCC is one of the most well-established parent carer fora in England, with a membership that has grown to over 5,000. The strength of partnership-working and genuine co-production is seen in the feedback from WPCC members, WPCC and Wiltshire Council leaders, external validation from inspections and peer reviews, and from the positive impact of the services WPCC is funded to deliver, such as the SEND Information Service or parenting support programmes. Key to the success of strategic co-production in Wiltshire has been the investment in WPCC as a formal, strategic partner, embedding co-production in the culture, routines and ways of working on the local SEND system, and commissioning WPCC to deliver specific projects that ensures WPCC plays a key role in helping parents and carers navigate the local SEND system.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the "strength of evidence" of this case study is **promising** – WPCC's work has been sustained for 15 years, and has been evaluated and validated through internal evaluation routines and external peer reviews. The "breadth of impact" of this case study is **promising** – there is evidence of impact on the lived experiences of families, and from the feedback from professionals.¹



¹ The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework uses two "signal strength" indicators to present the strength of evidence and the breadth of impact of a case study. Each indicator has four bars – emerging, promising, good and robust. The "strength of evidence" indicator is based on how the project has been evaluated and the length of time it has been sustained. The "breadth of impact" indicator is based on whether the case study can demonstrate impact in four broad areas – the more areas of impact, the higher the signal strength indicator.

Why was this work undertaken? What did the work aim to do?

The origins of the Wiltshire Parent Carer Council (WPCC) can be found in the Aiming High for Disabled Children programme. In 2008, a small group of parents and carers of children with SEN, involved in Aiming High, recognised that there was not a strong, collaborative partnership between parents / carers and leaders of local SEND services. The relationship was characterised by mistrust. In the words of one parent / carer involved at the time, 'parents experienced the relationship as a "fight", while local authority colleagues probably felt that they just got a barrage of abuse.'

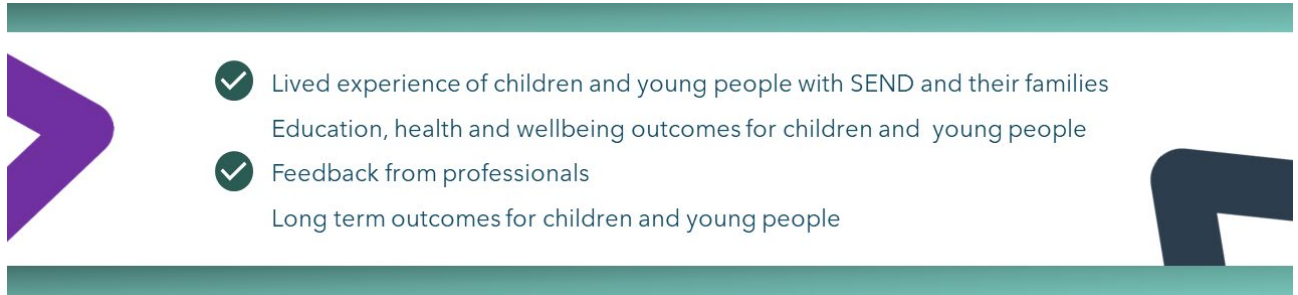
Despite this frustration, those involved in working together on Aiming High could see the potential of harnessing the passion, expertise and collective experiences of parents and carers, and creating opportunities for this to help to inform decision-making, shape services, and ultimately make a positive difference to young people with SEND and their families.

In establishing WPCC, the aims were threefold:

1. To establish an organisation led by parents / carers - that would provide a route for parents / carers of children with SEND to use their passion and expertise to shape the local SEND system, so that their individual and collective experiences were reflected in decisions about support;
2. To create an authentic partnership between parents / carers and service leaders - characterised by trust, genuine co-production and two-way communication; and
3. For that partnership to make a positive difference to services, experiences and outcomes for families - with a clear role for WPCC to lead on or contribute to specific projects to improve information about and access to support for families of children with SEND.



What was the impact?



The project has been able to demonstrate impact in two of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework. WPCC has been able to show impact in relation to each of its three core aims:

1. Establish an organisation that would provide parents / carers with the opportunity to shape the local SEND system

WPCC was established in 2008 and has been operating continuously ever since. In its first ten years, WPCC membership grew to 2,500, and had more than doubled to over 5,000 by 2024. WPCC remains an organisation run by parents and carers for parents and carers.

2. Create an authentic partnership

Council and WPCC leaders consider that they have successfully established and, more crucially, maintained a commitment to co-productive working that has seen the local SEND system through changes in national policy, many local initiatives, and changes in personnel in key service leadership levels. They consider that the partnership is characterised by trust and genuine two-way communication between equal partners. The strength of the partnership has been a common theme in inspections, peer reviews and other external studies of the Wiltshire SEND system.

"Our work with WPCC is part of a whole-system approach. There is nothing we do that does not involve WPCC. The decisions we have taken have always been better because they have been properly informed. The process of making what have been some very tricky decisions has been made so much easier because we have a good, honest and trusting working relationship. We can say with a high degree of confidence that we know what works and what doesn't work in our services."

Senior Council officer, quoted for a case study in a [Local Government Association report in 2018](#)

"Elected members and senior officers from Wiltshire Council regularly attend workshops and information-sharing events, often facilitated by the WPCC, to engage with and listen to feedback from parents and families. This collaborative approach is effective in reducing the number of cases which move on to further stages in the appeals process."

Joint Local Area SEND Inspection, 2018

"Parents and carers are well engaged through an active and well-established parent carer forum that has over 4,200 registered members and is a key strategic partner, participating at board level." **Local Government Association peer review, 2023**

3. Make a positive difference to services, experiences and outcomes for families

WPCC has been involved in a wide array of [projects](#) relating to aspects of the local SEND system in Wiltshire.

- ✦ **Short breaks:** designed in consultation with parents and carers, the Wiltshire Short Breaks Scheme aims to meet the individual needs and interests of children and young people who require additional support to either access or engage in leisure activities and social opportunities. The Wiltshire approach to short breaks received national recognition in 2010. As one member of WPCC put it, *"this was the first time parents had had a positive experience of shaping something, and seeing themselves in services being commissioned."*
- ✦ **Special Educational Needs and Disability Information Service (SENDIS):** this is a service WPCC is funded to provide, offering a one-stop-shop of information and signposting for families to local specialist services. WPCC also has SENDIS Outreach Officers, who work on a 1-to-1 basis with parents / carers who might find it difficult to access SENDIS support otherwise. WPCC consider that this service allows them to play a crucial role in advising and guiding parents in navigating the SEND system. As one WPCC leader put it, being responsible for delivering SENDIS *"places us at the heart of the local offer, and brings the local offer to life - we are the first port-of-call for parents."* WPCC track both the number of enquiries from parents / carers (which have increased from c.1250 in 2018 to consistently more than 2,200 in 2020, 2021 and 2022) and satisfaction rates (93% were 'extremely satisfied' in 2022). A selection of quotes from parents / carers using SENDIS are below.

"I always get a call back within a day if I leave a message. Everyone is so busy but always so helpful and I always feel strongly supported and leave feeling positive."

"[WPCC colleague] was very qualified to deal with my issues with my son. Having a child with special needs [they] understood everything I needed and spoke about. I am really grateful for the support that has been given to me."

"When one is not used to the system and how it works, plus the forms, these members of staff are so helpful. I would certainly recommend anyone struggling with a child / young person to contact them."

Wiltshire's local area SEND inspection also commented positively on SENDIS:

"Information officers, employed by the Wiltshire Parent Carer Council (WPCC), work tirelessly to support parents and carers in navigating the local offer and providing individual information, guidance and support to families. They provide informative weekly newsletters, information events and regular workshops which are well attended. Often facilitated by the WPCC, the local area has been very active, consulting with parents and carers across the county and responding to feedback through regular 'You said, we did' reports."

- ✦ **Parenting support programmes:** WPCC have co-designed and co-delivered a range of support programmes for parents of children with SEND, including, most recently, 'Time Out for Parents'. This is offered free-of-charge to parents / carers of children aged 3-11 with SEND. Parents / carers attending the course reported improvements in their confidence in relation to understanding and supporting their child with their needs between starting and finishing the course. On average, parents / carers gave the course 4.2 out of 5 stars in terms of making a difference to their parenting, and 4.6 out of 5 in terms of their satisfaction with the course. A selection of quotes from parents and carers about the course are below.

"Very beneficial and makes you feel like you are not alone."

"It was great to meet the other parents that are all in the same boat."

"Practically very helpful in terms of advice and signposting. Emotionally very helpful as supportive and thoughtful."

"The course gives you tools to help and guide your family through tough times."

- ✦ **Discussion and Decision (DaD) groups:** in 2023, Wiltshire re-designed the processes through which they make statutory decisions, such as whether to undertake EHC needs assessments, to incorporate the voices of parents / carers, improve transparency to parents / carers, and improve the consistency and quality of decision-making. Wiltshire Council and WPCC worked together to consider how the voice of parents / carers could be included in DaD meetings. Parents / carers were subsequently invited to become DaD panel 'moderators', and received training and ongoing supervision from senior WPCC leaders. At each DaD meeting, the parent / carer moderator provides feedback on the quality of the meeting, discussion and decision-making, against agreed criteria. At the most recent meeting, in November 2023, the parent / carer moderator considered that all criteria had been fully met (8 of 11 criteria) or partially met (3 of 11 criteria).

What were the key actions and practices involved?

WPCC and Wiltshire Council leaders reflected on three key elements of their work that have helped to establish and sustain strategic coproduction in Wiltshire.

1. Invest in WPCC's capacity as a strategic partner

Wiltshire Council, under different leaders, has continued to invest in building and maintaining the capacity of WPCC so that the latter can play the role of a genuine strategic partner. WPCC's role and responsibilities are set out in a formal grant agreement, which is reviewed regularly. Investment has been targeted towards building the capacity of the organisation in areas such as participation and running the SENDIS service. WPCC has a [staff team](#) of 15 staff (7x full-time equivalents), and a wider team of more than 30 volunteers. Recently, a new paid 'Volunteer Co-ordinator' role has been created to provide dedicated support WPCC volunteers. There are named leads that own specific projects within WPCC and Wiltshire Council, meaning officers within the Council and WPCC work together at a range of levels. This ensures that the relationship between WPCC and the Council is not held solely by WPCC's Director and the Council's Head of SEND. Moreover, the expectation of working co-productively is built into the expectations of all key roles within the Council – it is included in job descriptions, and WPCC are involved in the interviews and induction of new staff.

2. Pro-active focus on reaching a broader range of parent / carer voices

Central to WPCC's role is the need to be pro-active in reaching an ever-broader group of parents / carers of children with SEND. The growth in WPCC's membership reflect the success of this work, but crucial to achieving this has been establishing WPCC's presence at key points in parents' / carers' journeys through the local SEND system. As noted above, the SENDIS service is an important first port-of-call for parents and carers. Pro-active outreach helps WPCC reach a wider group of parents / carers, with teams of volunteers linked to community groups, early years settings and schools, promoting awareness and the benefits of WPCC's work.

The short breaks application form includes a request to share families' contact details with WPCC, so that WPCC can be pro-active in reaching out to any new families with whom they have not worked before.

3. Two-way communication and joint responsibility

WPCC see their role as bringing the voice of families into discussions around the shape of support and services. This is distinct from being a 'campaigning' organisation. The partnership between Wiltshire Council and WPCC is based on equality of standing between the two partners. This means that communication is two-way, with both partners being able to raise issues, ideas and initiatives – as opposed to one partner consulting the other when required. This also means that both partners take, in the words of one WPCC leader, 'responsibility from beginning to end' for working together to identify issues, develop solutions, reach and implement decisions.

Has the work been sustained?

WPCC has been running continuously for over 15 years, encompassing periods of significant change in national policy, the growth of WPCC, and changes in personnel in key roles within the local authority and partner agencies. This case study would be relevant to any local area seeking to foster effective, meaningful and impactful co-production and ensuring the local parent carer forum can be an effective strategic partner in the local SEND system. We recognise that not all local areas will be in a position to commission the breadth of services that WPCC is commissioned to provide, but we hope that the learning from WPCC's work is relevant to local areas seeking to develop some aspects of the broader strategic or service delivery role that WPCC plays in the Wiltshire SEND system.

WPCC is supported through sustained funding from Wiltshire County Council. Council and WPCC leaders consider that 'realistic financial support' is essential to WPCC being in a position to play its wider strategic and service delivery roles, but that this pays dividends in terms of the services WPCC delivers and the breadth of voices and perspectives it can bring to strategic co-production.



Finding out more

Contact to find out more	Stuart Hall, Director, WPCCC director@wiltspcc.co.uk
Useful resources and links	More details about WPCCC can be found here .