

# Improving parent carer participation and co-production in Haringey

an independent review by Amaze

commissioned by Contact and Haringey Council

July 2020



## Executive Summary

Amaze was jointly commissioned by Contact and Haringey Council to undertake a review of parent carer participation, with the intention of making a series of recommendations about how this can be improved. Our review included a survey and focus groups with a total of 89 parent carers and interviews with 25 professionals from different sectors.

One of the aims of the Children and Families Act 2014 was to fully embed individual and strategic participation, placing children with SEND and their families at the centre of SEND processes and services. Nationally, progress to implement these sweeping reforms has been very variable and significant challenges remain for many areas. In 2019, the Education Select Committee published a report reviewing how effective the 2014 reforms had been across England and it found that many of the aims were yet to be realised. It also highlighted the ongoing plight of parent carers across the country, who often have to 'wade through a treacle of bureaucracy, full of conflict, missed appointments and despair' and concluded that, alongside significant funding, a systemic cultural shift would be required to deliver the outcomes children need.

Our research found many of these findings reflected in Haringey, with further complexities due to its very diverse population and high levels of deprivation. We found a lack of continuity in leadership, repeated movement of the SEND team between portfolios, staff turnover and inconsistent practice, which have hampered Haringey's attempts to deliver the systemic cultural changes that have been needed over the last six years. Most parent carers we spoke with told us they had to fight to receive services for their child(ren) and some had a low level of confidence and trust in the authority to deliver services in a timely and accessible way. We heard many examples of families in Haringey who needed more support from key services such as respite and social care, as well as more accessible information to enter and navigate the SEND system.

There is currently no formal route for parent participation in Haringey as the parent carer forum, Haringey Involve, was decommissioned in 2019. While there has been some participation it has been difficult for all involved. Engagement has lacked the necessary structures, policies and process and has also been limited in its reach. In our view, previous attempts to develop a Parent Carer Forum (PCF) have been hampered by insufficient local investment and because other priorities have pushed participation down the list for some professionals, and families say following their input there has been little in the way of action, follow up and tangible results. Parents reported other challenges including a lack of joined up working, poor customer service and communication, and a lack of empathy or understanding of their situations. Clear structures are not yet in place to invite a diverse team of parent representatives to input to agendas at an

early stage in a planned way, so it is not surprising that 63 per cent of respondents to our survey said they did not feel at all involved in shaping local services.

Despite these difficulties, the vast majority of parent carers we spoke to were keen to play an active role in participation opportunities particularly if they could see how their input improved outcomes and services for their children. Most feel it is essential to set up a new PCF which is governed and led by a steering group with a diverse membership including key support groups. Parent reps will also need training and support to lead on particular areas of work feeding into key decision-making boards. Parents at our focus groups also want boundary pieces of work and flexible ways to get involved – at different times and using different formats – so a varied menu of activity needs to be developed going forwards.

Professionals were also keen to do more engagement with families and senior leaders have indicated a strong commitment to facilitating change in the borough to improve participation. But there is much to overcome, including the defensive culture of some professionals, a lack of capacity in their roles, and agreement around ways of working and codes of conduct. They said that the differing aims and priorities amongst parents were sometimes difficult to navigate and they felt they needed closer working relationships with a wider range of parents. Many also felt they would need more time and training on co-production and participation techniques.

Since our research phase with parents, the Covid-19 lockdown has had a huge adverse impact on families. In times like these, the strong collective voice of a forum would have been incredibly helpful to service leaders, with parents co-producing emergency policies and solutions. Therefore, it feels urgent that Haringey responds positively and swiftly to our recommendations, including the 'key ingredients' that we have found to be essential to participation, to co-produce an action plan and statement of intent with the community. This will need to be led from the top, with local investment made in setting up and supporting a new PCF, with training for all staff around participation co-delivered by parents, embedding participation expectations into staff work plans and celebrating and sharing the impact of successful participation to families via strengthened communication channels.

Finally, it's important to note that some parents we spoke to did report having good experiences, which happened when they, and their children, were listened to and their knowledge and expertise was recognised and used in decision-making. This was often on account of the actions of one or two individuals in the system with whom they have developed a positive relationship. All professionals working in Haringey need to engage parents as equal partners, who can make informed and valuable contributions to the design, delivery and review of services. If done well, true co-production has the potential to effect real change and ensure services meet, and are responsive, to the varied needs of the local community.