



# Delivering Differently in neighbourhoods

## Case Study

Bracknell Forest - Families in a Strong Community Project

#redesign #communityengagement #neighbourhoodsupport #earlysupport #earlyintervention #communityempowerment #employability

# The headlines

- Redesigning services to some of the most vulnerable members of the community by establishing a programme of neighbourhood based very early support and intervention.
- A new model for delivery based on recruiting and training local residents.
- A team of volunteers acting as Family Partners playing a key role in providing advice and support on a one to one and group basis.
- Volunteers trained to offer support in a variety of settings including Children's Centres, Schools and Community Groups.
- Increasing employability of local residents via volunteering, ongoing training and confidence building.

**“ We would like to see that not as many people progress into statutory services. We are also keen to have a diverse range of volunteers; we want volunteers to be able to relate to their communities.”**

Abby Thomas Head of Community Engagement and Equalities Bracknell Forest Council

## What is the context?

Bracknell Forest lies 28 miles west of London, at the heart of the Thames Valley and within the county of Berkshire. The borough's population is 118,025 (Mid-2014 Estimates, based on Census 2011).

The population is relatively young (median age 38.4 years). 13.6% of the population is aged 65 or over,

compared to 17.7% nationally, although this is expected to grow

Bracknell Forest is one of the least deprived areas of the country (ranked 287 out of 326 local authorities in England on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015). Property prices and levels of car ownership are significantly higher than the national average. However, these headline figures mask significant pockets of deprivation. For instance, 8 out of 19 wards in the borough have free school meal eligibility of over 10%.

Bracknell Forest Council Plan 2015-19 is centred upon a key statement of vision for the organisation which includes the prioritisation of people

Bracknell Forest Council has a strategic priority to build volunteering and improve community resilience. We are keen to build and support communities that can help themselves through the increased use of volunteers.

We were keen to identify when families start to struggle and provide early help to prevent escalation of problems, for the benefit of those families, the local community and the area as a whole.

In order to meet these aims we piloted a feasibility project to redesign services to some of the most vulnerable members of the community through establishing a programme of neighbourhood based very early support and intervention.

This is focussed on three Bracknell Town areas:

Harmans Water  
Wildridings  
Great Hollands

These were chosen as areas of deprivation and high need. For example 17.6% of children in Wildridings and Central are at risk of living in poverty, compared with 11.7% across Bracknell Forest (September 2015)

**“ We want groups to increase through personal recognition, this suggests that families get a lot from attending and think it's worth others attending – supports the community to help each other**

**We want to decrease isolation**

**We want to see an increase in friendships being formed**

**We want to see volunteers increase in confidence**

**We want to build resilience**

**We want to avoid families needing more specialist support.”**

Sarah Holman – Project Manager

# What service delivery model has been adopted?

We wished to investigate using volunteers to peer support other families from within their own community. The building of community based support was important to test whether this model could increase community resilience and community self reliance.

Firstly, a Theory of Change approach was used and the associated workshop was attended by over 20 people from Bracknell Forest, voluntary organisations and volunteers. The approach was used to understand the changes required for the project to achieve its objectives. It enabled the council to challenge the project on whether the changes required for it to meet its objectives were sufficient and likely to happen.

Bracknell Forest Council has a new transformation programme aligned to the Council Plan aims and objectives outlined in the previous section - which includes:

- Early intervention and prevention
- Evidence of less customer contact and more self-reliant communities who do not need to contact us

The Council developed a new model for delivery based on recruiting and training local residents. The plan was that a team of local residents/volunteers acted as Family Partners and played a key role in providing advice and support on a one to one basis.

The initial aim was to provide a Parent Partner programme with two main components:

- Selection and training of suitable adults to undertake the role of a Parent Partner
- Deployment of Parent Partners with on-going professional support

Parent partners were to identify and act on opportunities to build relationships with vulnerable families and aim to work with these families with the ultimate aim of developing social capital within their neighbourhood. We have adapted the model over time and evolved the project to meet the needs of the volunteers and the community. It was initially envisaged that Parent Partners would provide 1-1 support for families in the community. After successful recruitment and training of volunteers, it became apparent that:

- It was hard to identify families for 1-1 support where their needs could be matched with a volunteer
- Volunteers had different skill sets which were not always appropriately matched to the work they were expected to do

We therefore adapted their approach in order to still reach vulnerable people in the community and use the volunteers best skill sets in the right area as well as to ensure that a successful project was provided. This flexibility has been key to its success.

This flexibility in approach has been supported by a Bracknell Forest Project Board and Steering group which allowed for a wide range of view and professionals to become involved in the development of the project.

The project is supporting 16 families directly through a mix of support groups and 1-1's. The groups currently running are:

- Friendship groups for Post-Natal Depression (PND)
- Friendship group for parents of ASD diagnosed children (0-5) and some undiagnosed
- Healthy cooking group for vulnerable parents and children.
- School readiness support group
- SEN support groups as Wildridings and Meadowvale schools

There are plans to run a further healthy eating course and special educational needs and disability groups supporting families with children over the age of 5. In addition another post-natal friendship group is due to start in April 2016 in another geographical area of Bracknell Forest. Volunteers are also participating in a wide range of volunteering placements such as schools and children's centres.

## **Volunteer Training**

This was a key area of success for the project. Involve, the central support organisation for voluntary, community and faith groups in Bracknell Forest, were asked by Bracknell Forest to support recruiting and training volunteers. Involve advertised for the volunteers and carried out interviews on a joint basis with Bracknell Forest Council. A small amount of money was allocated to create a bespoke training programme. Recruitment of volunteers was very successful and according to Involve the most successful recruitment that they had ever seen.

Volunteers were trained in the following areas:

- The role of volunteers
- equality and diversity
- family life and supporting parents
- safeguarding level 1
- roles of partner agencies and signposting to support
- boundaries and confidentiality

The training was provided in 2 course types:

- Two courses were held over five weeks during the day time where a crèche was provided to encourage younger mums to participate
- Training at the weekend in order to meet the needs of volunteers who couldn't attend during the week.

Volunteers have been offered a variety of additional courses and are benefitting from this upskilling. Volunteers have attended courses on hoarding, anxiety, sleep behaviours, digital skills and numeracy skills. Upcoming courses include working with stuck families, family life cycles, domestic violence awareness and mental health first aid. These courses are fully funded by Bracknell Forest Council.

# Who are the key partners?

## **Bracknell Forest Council**

Key partners within the Bracknell Forest Council are the Early Intervention team and community learning in addition to:

### **Involve**

Involve provide local support for the voluntary and community sector for Bracknell Forest. They carry out development work and training for charities and the wider voluntary sector and promote volunteering as part of the national “do it” campaign.

They are a key partner and for this project they supported Bracknell Forest Council by advertising and recruiting volunteers (joint interviews) with the local authority.

They were involved from inception and before and have been a member of the steering group along with Bracknell Forest Homes (housing association).

## **Bracknell Forest Homes**

Bracknell Forest Homes are enthusiastic about the project as they own the majority of the housing stock in the more deprived areas of Bracknell Forest where the pilot took place and therefore it is largely their tenants who would be volunteering and receiving support.

## **Health Visitors**

At one Children’s Centre in particular there has been excellent support from Health Visitors (HV) who have referred Mums with PND to the key support group.

## **Schools**

Wildridings school have been running the Families and Schools together programme (FAST). 23 families attended the programme and family retention was high. The school has noted greater family involvement with the school and increased parenting skills. Child behaviour has also improved.

A volunteer from Families in a Strong Community Project was used to support this project and will be helping further through regular workshops with parents on a wide variety of topics.

## **Children’s Centres**

Within the piloted areas two children’s centres were involved in the project, this included allowing support groups to be situated within the Children’s centres, referring parents to the volunteering training courses, referring families for support and promoting the project via newsletters and advertising. In particular using trained volunteers in other areas within the children centre and using them to support other community based family groups.

“ It would be good to see excellent links between schools and children’s centres and people in the community as partnership working is very important. I feel the right people are on the steering group which includes children’s centres, schools, the LA and the Open Learning Centre (adult education)”

Phil Cook, Involve

# What has been the impact?

Interviews identified that key indicators of success include:

- 26 volunteers coming forward, attending the training and saying that it was good and useful training
- Targeted groups and 1-1 work being provided at an early level in local communities
- Self referrals and community referrals to both the volunteer training and to attend the groups increased by word of mouth
- Good outcomes for volunteers themselves
- Importantly all attendees felt that their skills increased as a result of the training. Evaluations were taken before and after training opportunities supported this view.

## Impact on Volunteers

The impact on volunteers, their skills and confidence has been very clear as shown through feedback from the volunteers themselves. As outlined above the recruitment of volunteers was a key success, as was the training.

- Numbers expressing interest in volunteering on the project was high when compared to similar recruitment for other community projects.
- Attendance and retention on the course was high
- Volunteers spoke highly of the training
- The volunteers felt energised and ready to start supporting in the community
- Many volunteers have gone on to take up further learning opportunities as a direct result of the training
- Volunteers have gained a lot personally from volunteering:
  - Increased their skills
  - Seen a large increase in their confidence levels
  - Been encouraged and empowered to study further (eg, maths and English study)
  - Been encouraged to skill up for work
  - Have carried out volunteering and added skills and experience to their CV
  - Have been successful in finding work (3 as a direct result of the volunteering)
  -

## Volunteers said:

“My parenting skills have improved, I am more confident with my own family and I am using the things I have learnt with my own family and to signpost others including family and friends. I love it!”

“I have much more self-worth, knowing I am helping others. It has added to my confidence and I am better able to cope. I was withdrawn, but now I am confident and happy to talk to people. The training was really good and I have understood about things like learning patterns which has given me tools to help in my own family. This is a very exciting project and I am very excited to be helping. “

“I can see that others like the fact that there is someone they can talk to who has been through a similar experience. They are very positive. In the post-natal friendship group they also seem very happy to attend and then they continue to return. It helps parents know that it is normal people who have been through the same thing, they feel that health workers give good advice but have never been through the issue of PND themselves, whereas we have. “

## Impact on Families - Emotional Wellbeing

Families who are regularly attending friendship support groups are telling us that they feel better able to cope, welcome the opportunity to be part of a supportive network of volunteers, other families and Family Support Worker. A strong early indicator is that parents are telling us they feel less isolated within their community.

### Family study 1

#### Family composition

Mum, Dad, daughter aged five, son aged four with additional support needs, and baby aged seven months.

#### Context

I became depressed after the birth of my youngest and my health visitor mentioned this group that is running for children with additional needs. My four-year-old J has significant development needs.

I have had an assessment but recently been advised that he does not meet the threshold for autism. I feel devastated by this and that nobody understands how bad his disabilities are, or how hard it is to cope on a daily basis. I just want to run away.

My husband (M) is not coping at all as he is avoiding the situation and doesn't want to be alone with J. The pressure on me is absolutely immense. If J is being noisy or unhappy I am more worried about how M will react than I am with managing J.

I feel very lonely and regularly feel that I can't cope. I am begging for support from people but just not getting it as he is not 'bad enough'. The only person who understands me is Kelly (worker) as she has a child with similar disabilities.

Over Christmas things deteriorated drastically as our routine changed slightly and J could not cope with that. He started wetting the bed, became angry, M could not cope, and my five-year-old thinks that I love J more than her because I give him a lot more time. I really am at the end of my tether and I feel very lonely. I know that M wants to avoid all this as he can't cope but I can't either but have no choice. I would just like some sleep and feel in a constant state of guilt and worry.

#### Impact of group/support

**"If I didn't come to this group I just don't know what I would do with myself. I look forward to coming even though it's really difficult to get out of the house and I don't really want to speak to anybody. But at least people here understand what I'm going through. This really is my lifeline. I know when I'm here that it's not just me and I get reassurance. I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said this is my saviour of the week. None of my family really understand how difficult this is and none of my friends really understand. I feel very lonely. I can understand why mums take their own lives. I would never do that but it's this group that keeps me going.**

### Family study 2

#### Family composition

Mum, Dad, daughter aged 3 and daughter aged 18 months

#### Context

I suffered with postnatal depression after I had my second child. I knew that I was getting depressed and forced myself to go out against what I really wanted as I knew it was the right thing for my children. I attended a baby group where you get your children weighed and it was workers at the children's centre that recommended this group.

#### Impact of group/support

**The main reason that I came here is because it's free. I looked at other places but you have to pay for all of them. It's an excuse to get out and make the children play but for me I feel I need to go, and I look forward to going. If there was anything I would change I would probably like this more often, and maybe at a different venue where there is more space (for older children to run around) and toys for older children. We do need a K though to be honest. She recognised one week that I was particularly quiet and she picked up the phone and checked up on me. I really appreciated that and that's what makes me come again. I know that people care. I have also been given the confidence to attend because I am in regular contact with K.**

**Families said:**

“It’s this group that keeps me going”

“It’s a lifeline for me – my saviour”

“I feel I need to go, and I look forward to going”

“I have had good support from S on a weekly basis and also from K and they have helped and encouraged me”

People are turning up for groups on a regular basis and they see value in them and the support that they receive from the family partner worker, volunteers and others in the group. It is clear from the families and volunteers interviewed that the group work is providing extremely valuable support.

Starting with group work leading to 1-1 support has worked well. It has been ‘less scary’ to attend a group. This has led to building trusting relationships and one to one help can then be offered.

Where further support has been offered all individuals/families have agreed to the more intensive one to one support

**Parents attending the post Natal Post Nata Depression Groups completed the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) at the beginning of the support and 5 months later, the scores decreased by a significant point score which indicates a strong link between the support given and increased mental health and wellbeing of those parents.**

**Impact on Families – Cost benefit Analysis**

We undertook a cost benefit assessment of the project building on the costs and benefits identified through a Theory of Change workshop..

**Our analysis suggests a discounted total public value of the project at £113,644 or public value return on investment of £1.32 for every £1.00 of investment.**

Of the total fiscal benefits 44% would accrue to the NHS and 41% to the DWP, 5% to the LA and the remainder to police and probation service .

**It is working. I believe needs may have escalated and we have seen excellent results here. One mum was severely post nately depressed and now, following the volunteer training course, supports one-to-one families and groups and is now looking for work this has been a huge improvement for her**

Kelly Higgins Family Partner Worker, Bracknell Forest Council

## What have been the key elements of success?

- **Recruiting volunteers** – Involve supported BF in recruiting and training volunteers, by advertising and carrying interviews on a joint basis. Leaflet drops, newsletters and leaflets in children’s centres and schools were used. **Leaflets to individual houses were found to have had the most impact.**
- **Training volunteers** - a number of courses were offered (see above in ‘model’) and this was offered in two ways; during the week and at weekends to suit volunteer’s time constraints.
- **Supporting volunteers** - Bracknell Forest staff and Involve staff have supported volunteers throughout the training and volunteer placements and this has been well received, with volunteers feeling eager to continue. For example, we provided lunch and a crèche facility, which helped volunteers to feel valued.
- **Good relationship** with the voluntary sector, community learning, Health Visitors and the Children’s Centres.
- **Ability to flex the project** – it was important to establish what the project was and evolve the project based on the skills and experience of the volunteers and the gap identified in the community. In our case, this led to our project being more about group work than originally intended.
- Starting with **group work leading to 1-1 support has worked well.** It has been ‘less scary’ for people to attend a group and this has led to building trusting relationships from which 1-1 support can then be offered.
- **Co-ordination and planning from the Council** - in particular the Bracknell Forest project manager in building relationships across partners and driving the shared vision for the project.

## What has been learnt?

- There was some initial nervousness from service partners regarding the use of volunteers to support vulnerable families and groups. This was overcome as the benefit of using volunteers to build community capacity became apparent.
- Some paid professionals are required to manage and support volunteering/volunteers in the community. They also need to be prepared to fill gaps and step in where volunteers do not deliver what is expected in order not to let the community down. This is particularly important if volunteers do not turn up on time or pull out of volunteering assignments at short notice.
- Groups must be the right groups on the right issues to gain regular commitment (For example Post natal friendship groups). When families see a need to attend because the support is the right support, they continue to attend even when it is difficult for them to.
- It is important to understand individual’s motivations to volunteer in order to keep them engaged and actively involved. Groups are more successful when run by people interested in the subject. In this case volunteers were recruited to assist in the running of support groups where they either expressed interest in a support area or may have had personal experiences of those areas.
- Timing of training/volunteering is important. Some volunteers mentioned the frustration of the distance between training volunteers and giving them something active to do. This led to them to lose enthusiasm and needs to be considered when carrying out training and increasing volunteering.

“ We want to see community activity in involving and engaging volunteers to support families in local areas. We want people to come forward, undertake training, and support families in their communities and to integrate this into Children Centres. Early intervention and prevention and self reliant communities are priorities for the Council. ”

Abby Thomas Head of Community Engagement and Equalities Bracknell Forest Council

## Who can I contact?

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## Other information

We will soon be running a **volunteering workshop** for staff and partners to discuss plans to increase volunteering across a wide range of services.

We are also in early discussions about having a **volunteer's passport** which supports volunteers to get back to work. So for example if they attend a safeguarding level one course or other training linked to volunteering this can be added to their passport and it stands elsewhere in Bracknell Forest. This adds additional content to their CVs and supports volunteers back into work.

Work from this project is being linked into corporate strategy around Bracknell Forest Council Plan 2015-19 which is centred upon a key statement for the organisation

- Many residents of Bracknell Forest are affluent, well educated and independent. We want to continue to support that by providing core services that all residents can benefit from

- But we need to prioritise if we are to live within our means, and that will mean making difficult decisions

- We will prioritise people and areas with the greatest need, early help and prevention so struggling or vulnerable people can maximise their opportunities to become independent.

This narrative is supported by six strategic themes;

- Value for money
- A strong and resilient economy
- People have the life skills and education opportunities they need to thrive
- People live active and healthy lifestyles
- A clean, green, growing and sustainable place
- Strong, safe, supportive and self-reliant communities

For further information please visit  
[www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk](http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk)