

Camden and Islington VRU Funded Parenting Project

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Executive Summary

The London VRU funded Camden and Islington councils to jointly deliver a comprehensive package of family support services from the 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2022 to equip parents and carers with the skills necessary to prevent them needing to access further support services. Parents and children were supported through various life-course approach programmes and interventions, including primary to secondary school transition support, family support and online training. Initially, the project had three distinct but interconnected strands: E-Learning, Parental Support and Transition support for children moving from year 6 to year 7; however, a parent champions element developed out of the E-Learning programme.

London Metropolitan University was commissioned to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and employed a mixed methods approach to consider the following:

1. How has the project helped empower service users to make a continued change in their lives?
2. How has the geographic catchment area of the project influenced the planning, management, and delivery of the project?

In total, 285 parents and 24 young people were directly supported through the various interventions, including providing transition support to 24 young people, support to 8 families and E-learning to an average of 57 parents a quarter. Over 90% of the parents supported were female, and 66% of the young people supported were male. In addition, 70% of the parent champions are from a Black and Minority Ethnic background, and 68% of the young people engaged were from a Black and Minority Ethnic background. Despite the disproportionality in these statistics, Black young people are more likely to grow up in poverty and achieve lower grades at school¹. Black children and young people are also over-represented in school exclusion figures. This suggests the project supports those who will most benefit from the interventions.

The E training provided training that professionals would typically receive to parents and carers. The principle behind the approach was that parents and carers are experts on their children, and if supported to understand them better, they will be able to provide the best possible care for them. The training topics were selected to empower parents and carers to tackle some of the prominent risk factors associated with youth violence and exploitation, including understanding social media and online safety, County Lines supporting those with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) needs, and understanding how to navigate the Educational, Health and Care plan (EHCP) referral process and training around employment and benefits.

¹ State of Equalities in Islington Annual Report and Camden Equality Profile 2021

The parent champions groups that emerged from the training have already organised their own training sessions, spoke at public engagements, and produced a podcast programme. However, possibly, more importantly, they have been equipped to provide crisis support to community members and have acted as an appropriate adult and supported friends and family to access support services.

As the parent champions start to offer more professionalised support, they will need to be supported further to understand boundaries and have access to support such as professional supervision. If developed appropriately, the parent champions could become vital in providing community based support to families at risk of experiencing knife crime and serious youth violence.

The family support programme was aimed at families whose children were vulnerable to school exclusion and criminal exploitation and had experienced domestic violence in the past. However, 50% needed to be 'stepped up' to social services and another 33% were referred for family support. Although it was felt that these more serious cases would have accessed either Early Help or Social Services at some point, the Parental Support programme did act as a catalyst to make this happen quicker. Unlike other services, families could stay open to the Parental Support programme whilst accessing other interventions. This helped ensure families were comfortable engaging with new services. Given that most families were referred to other services, there should be a review of whether the family support should remain in its current form or be revised to not duplicate the work of other provision.

The Transition project provided additional support to young people moving from primary to secondary school. It was clear that all the young people had experienced significant trauma in their childhood or had undiagnosed SEND. This group would usually struggle to integrate into secondary school; however, through the one to ones and group sessions, they were supported to develop their emotional intelligence and put coping mechanisms in place. Further still, the transitions workers advocated on the children and their families' behalf and helped the schools put additional support plans in place for each young person.

For the young people, the project made a profound difference, with young people recognising that they were:

- More confident at school
- Getting into less trouble at school
- Making friends more easily
- Able to ask for help at school
- Better able to regulate their emotions at school
- Confident enough to start new activities without feeling anxious
- Able to do more with less supervision/support

Given the developments since the project started and its potential to provide both formal and informal community based support, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. The project should consider how it can engage more fathers in all aspects of its delivery
2. London VRU to consider if the E-learning programme that provides parents access to professional training on issues such as internet safety, ECHP processes, Trauma Informed Practice, supporting young people with SLCD, ASD, mental health and learning difficulties should be continued and expanded in a localised way across London
3. The programme should include more opportunities for parents to build their friendship networks, possibly by allowing more time during online sessions for participants to get to know one another
4. If further Parent Champions groups are to be established across London, they will need facilitating and support to develop organically
5. Parent Champions should have access to group supervision and reflective practice spaces
6. The council should consider whether the current family support casework offer is strategically appropriate or whether its resources are better placed supporting families engage other existing services
7. The less formal relational approach has clear benefits, and the councils should explore whether this is suitable in other settings, with the support the VRU project provided to establish clear boundaries with service users
8. When referring families and young people who have experienced or are at risk of violence to other services, extended handover processes should be explored as an option.
9. More work needs to be done working alongside schools and other educational establishments to improve engagement with parents

In addition to the project delivery recommendations, the following is recommended for projects that involve cross borough working

10. A shared process should be established to ensure staff can access the relevant systems and processes across all local authorities involved to avoid delays to service users.
11. Strategic and operational oversight should be shared by all local authorities involved.
12. A set up and promotion period should be built into new projects delivery plans to ensure that potential referrers understand the services offered.
13. Other partners working with service users should seek to adopt the empowering ethos of the VRU Parent Empowerment Project.

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1. Introduction

The London VRU funded Camden and Islington councils to deliver a comprehensive package of parent/carer and family support services from the 1st April 2020 to 31st September 2021, with an extension to March 2022. Parents and children were supported through a suite of life-course approach programmes and interventions, including primary to secondary school transition support, family support and online training. The project aims to empower parents within gang affected areas to:

- Have opportunities to shape their own lives
- Be able to access information when they are worried about their child(ren)
- Improve their relationship(s) with their child(ren)
- Advocate for themselves and their children within the education system
- Access information when they are worried about their child(ren)
- Be more socially integrated within their local communities
- Be more able to share concerns, support each other, and be supported

The project also has the wider aims of:

- 'Parent Support' evidence base is developed upon which commissioning decisions can be based
- Increased service access for parents
- 'Parent support' contributes to violence reduction work in the area and London

As the project was delivered across local authority boundaries, the evaluation considered key learning and recommendations of cross boundary delivery and assessed whether the project delivered its intended outcomes.

Initially, the project had three distinct but interconnected strands: E-Learning, Parental Support and Transition support for children moving from year 6 to year 7. There was a specific geographic focus due to concerns over persistent youth violence issues in these areas. However, the project took on a wider focus as referrers did not always identify those within the initial geographic catchment area. Alongside the adaptations in geographic remit, the project grew in its delivery. Most notably, additional training topics were added to the E-Learning programme, and one parent champion group emerged out of the 2 E training programmes. As such, the project has developed significantly from the initially planned activity. Therefore, the evaluation considered both why these developments occurred and whether or not they provided added value.

2. Methodology

The project evaluated the project through a mixed methods approach. As project outputs were already captured as part of the reporting requirements, the evaluation data collection focused on providing qualitative data to support a richer understanding of the project's processes outcomes.

2.1 Research Question

The project will seek to answer the following questions:

1. How has the project helped empower service users to make a continued change in their lives?
 - a. How has the project reached the residents it was aimed to support?
 - b. How have the service users put the training/interventions into practice?
 - c. What change in their lives have the service users accredited to the project?
2. How has the geographic catchment area of the project influenced the planning, management, and delivery of the project?
 - a. Were the project's processes supportive enough for the project to run effectively?
 - b. What lessons can be learnt regarding cross-borough working?

2.2 Data Collection

Semi Structured interviews were used to understand how and why the project is achieving the reported outcomes. This included a focus on the following:

- Project staff members' view of the bureaucratic and delivery processes
- The project staff members' views on how well the project achieved its outcomes
- Project participants' views on the project's delivery and bureaucratic processes
- Project participants' views on how empowered they feel after participating in the interventions
- Project participants' views on how effective they have been in implementing change after taking part in the interventions

The interview data was supported by observations of the online training and transitions project sessions. The qualitative data was thematically coded in terms of project outcomes and themes emerging from the data using NVIVO. The qualitative data collection included the following:

Table 1: Qualitative Data		No
Parents supported through the project		8
Interviews with Parent Champions		8

Project staff interviews	5
Key Stakeholder interviews (trainers, other council staff)	5
Delivery Session Observations	8

The majority of the quantitative data came from the reporting data compiled for the VRU. However, there was an analysis of Early Help referral sources, and an E-Learning evaluation survey was developed for the evaluation. Therefore, the quantitative data analysed included:

Table 2: Quantitative Data
VRU reporting data
Referral sources
Training Evaluation Surveys

2.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify respondents who will be able to provide information regarding the project implementation, delivery, and outcomes. The interviews were limited to those who had significant engagement with the project and project participants.

2.1 Validity and Trustworthiness

Rather than aiming for statistical significance from large data samples, triangulation was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, comparing multiple data sets (both qualitative and quantitative) to develop a coherent narrative.

3. Evaluation Findings

This section presents the evaluation findings and is divided up into three sub sections. Initially, this section sets out the findings from the non casework element of the parent empowerment activities such as the E-Learning and the Parent Champions project. The following subsection discusses the casework elements of the project, namely the Transitions and the family support. Finally, the project set up and organisation, which considers how the initial set up of the project, cross borough working, the team structure and referral process influenced the project outcomes, are discussed. Recommendations are contained within each section.

285 parents and 24 young people were directly supported through the various interventions. Table 1 shows the breakdown of engagement for the different support strands.

Table 1: Project Engagement			
Project Strand	Target	Actual Year 1	Actual Year 2
Transitions	25	9	15
Family Support	30		4
E Learning	120	59	226
Parent Champions	0	10	10

In terms of reach, project reporting data indicates that over 90% of the parents supported were female, and 66% of the young people supported were male. This may represent the dynamics encountered, with more young men needing support and mothers taking on more parental responsibility than fathers. However, it does highlight the need to engage fathers in this process, which staff should consider how best to do going forward. This may be best achieved by partnering with local organisations already engaging with fathers or by commissioning an organisation that has a good record in this regard.

In terms of ethnicity, the project engaged parents from diverse backgrounds. 70% of the parent champions are from a Black and Minority Ethnic background, and 68%% of the young people engaged were from a Black and Minority Ethnic background. Despite the disproportionality in these statistics (only 33% of the local population are from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds), Black young people are more likely to grow up in poverty, be excluded from, and achieve lower grades at school², which does suggest the project is supporting those who will most benefit from the interventions and shows a good model of how local authorities and other agencies can build trust

² State of Equalities in Islington Annual Report and Camden Equality Profile 2021

within Black and minority ethnic groups, particularly when considering many participants heard about the project through word of mouth

3.1 Parent Empowerment (Non-Casework)

Rather than simply providing support to individual families, parent empowerment, which could be seen throughout the activities, was central to this project. The project's ethos is probably best summed up by a response by a member of staff at one of the training sessions who stated

"What we need is a community approach, if you know one of your friends is in need or you see your neighbour in need, help them; everyone on here can do that. This is how we build a community."

The initial plan was that this non-casework parent empowerment would take the form of E learning. However, parents from the first training cohort, wanted to develop a parent champions group. This opened up a new avenue for parent empowerment activities and influenced future training activities. Both of which are discussed in this section.

3.1.1 E Parent Training

The E training provided some of the training that professionals would receive to 285 parents and carers. The principle behind the approach was that parents and carers are experts on their children, and if supported to understand them better, they will be able to provide the best possible care for them.

The initial training programme was built around Social Switch training, developed by Catch 22 and Red Thread, to help professionals understand the issues young people face online. For this programme, Social Switch was delivered to parents to support them in engaging with their own children about their child's online activity and cascade the knowledge gained to other parents. Seven cohorts were trained, with sessions running weekly for four weeks. The Social Switch training became a prerequisite for becoming a parent champion.

In addition to the regular Social Switch programme, Online Security and digital literacy training were provided by Putitonline for parents to better understand online safety. These sessions were designed to be two hours but often took longer due to their interactive nature and desire for trainers to respond to the participants' questions. Although the content was complex, the trainers ensured that the information was delivered at the participant's pace.

The training topics were selected to empower parents and carers to tackle some prominent risk factors associated with youth violence. Initially, this included subjects such as understanding social media and online safety, county lines, employment, benefits, and training. However, as the project continued, parent champions

suggested additional topics based on what they and their friends and family needed support with. Therefore, other topics around supporting those with SEND needs and understanding how to navigate the EHCP referral process and how to engage effectively with schools around children's needs.

Table 4 outlines the twelve topics covered during the E training programme, indicating whether they were pre identified or put forward by the Parent Champions.

Table 4: E-Learning Topics	
Training included in the original project plan	Topics proposed by parent champions
Social Switch programme	Podcasts Training
Digital online training	School exclusion Training
Leap conflict resolution training	SEND Training
How to communicate with your child's school	Speech, Language, and communication difficulties
How to become a parent school governor	Diversion Workshop for the Somali Community
Mental Health Awareness training	
Trauma Informed Training for Parents/Carers A Community Approach	
County Line Webinar for Parents/Carers	
Stop & Search Training	
Welfare benefits/adult learning/employment and Business start ups	

The ethos of the training was summed up in this way by those involved in delivering the training

"It is about encouraging and empowering parents to feel the fear and go for it anyway, understand that they have resources at their disposal to foster this, these relationships and have the important conversations, and empower their children and for their children know that they're listened to, and their parents want to hear what they're saying."

"It's about helping create a facilitated environment whereby if something goes wrong, because there's already been conversations around these topics, it's the increase the potential of a young person approaching that same adult saying, you know what, I need your help now."

Training participants recognised this ethos, commenting

"And by the end of the training, they [the trainers] were like, you've got loads to give and far more than we think."

"I have two children, one who is 15 and is excluded at the moment and waiting for an EHCP and another seven year old with autism. It is good to know that I am not the only one going through this; I am not alone."

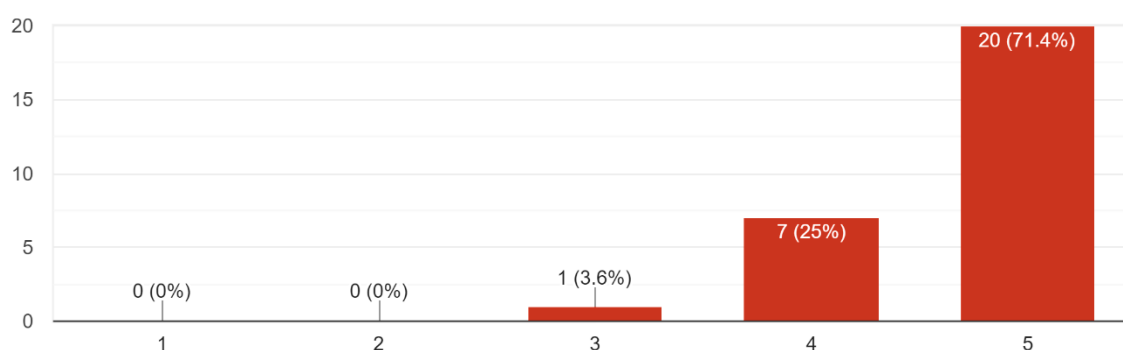
3.1.2 Effectiveness of the E Training

The facilitator's willingness to address questions and offer advice on areas not covered in the syllabus was noticeable in training. For example, trainers gave information on tools to help those with dyslexia be more confident when writing emails or letters. Other trainers offered bespoke advice to individuals, which soon became apparent and also spoke to the situations of others in attendance. Depending on the delivery style, this flexible element was present throughout the training or became apparent during the question and answer section of the training. Evaluation respondents often commented that more time should have been allocated to the question and answer section as it was the most helpful part of the training. All eight training observed overran in length simply because the facilitators extended the sessions to respond to questions from participants. The commitment of trainers was also demonstrated through some facilitators running 1:1 sessions for those who missed the training.

Although not statistically significant, the E training evaluation survey showed that learning how to interact with and better support their children or those living with them (48%) was the main reason for people joining the programme. This suggests that the training enables parents to access training that would only otherwise be available within professional circles.

In terms of the programme's effectiveness, Chart 1 shows that over 96% of respondents commented that the training gave them a decent amount or a lot of practical knowledge that they will be able to put into practice.

Chart 5: On a scale of 1 - 5 how much did the training give you practical knowledge that you can implement? 1= no practice knowledge, 2 = very little practical knowledge, 3= some practical knowledge, 4 = a decent amount of practical, 5 = a lot of practical knowledge



67% of those who responded to the survey said that the training helped them understand how to better support, or access support for, their children or family members.

The training participants interviewed all spoke of how the training gave them practical knowledge that they could put into practice

"It's changed my [perceptions] a lot, and I'm glad I'm aware. I now talk to my children about how they shouldn't talk to people you don't know. Like on Instagram, people can follow you and try and talk to you, but you don't know who they are as they have a fake name and fake photos."

"They taught me how to navigate social media a little bit more now because there is a generational gap between the parents and the children. Some might be tech savvy, and some might not know how to use social media properly. So, we learned a lot of different social media sites through the training."

One developmental comment was that some participants felt that there should have been break out rooms where parents could talk through their experiences and get to know one another to help form supportive friendships. The training often ended without trainees getting to know one another.

A more detailed breakdown of the training evaluation can be found in Appendix 1.

3.1.3 Parent Champions

A parent champion group emerged from the Parental Support Project, 70% of the parent champions are from a Black and minority ethnic background, and 90% are female. As noted above, there is a need to consider how the project can engage more fathers.

The parent champions grew out of the first social switch training with the view of establishing an ongoing parental support and empowerment group. New parent champions were recruited during each Social Switch iteration. The initial task for Parent Champions was to cascade the social switch training to their own personal network. This included running training sessions in small groups with friends and family and large audiences at churches. However, their role progressed into helping with the logistics of the wider training programme, advising on the training topics, and developing initiatives such as producing podcasts to disseminate the information they have gained more widely. The idea of the Parent Champions was summed up by one member who said

"The training is what professionals would get, just directed at parents, and then the idea is that parents will spread the word to other parents to different groups and interact to their family and friends in all."

The organised parent champion activities include:

- Members organising their own events to disseminate their social switch learning
- Speaking at local youth safety events
- Helping to shape parenting support training
- Producing six podcasts

An indication of the work of the parent champions can be found in Appendix 2, which gives a six month list of the group's activities.

Alongside empowering parents, a key goal of the parent champions is to give parents a voice within a social space where they often feel ignored or sidelined, which can lead to a negative outcome for young people. One champion explained

"What about the parents that are not proactive because they feel that they don't have a voice? So, parents feel that they're not being listened to, you know, we talk and talk, but a lot of the time, parents just say, well, what's the point? They're not gonna do anything. Nothing ever changes. Nothing is gonna happen, so then what ends up happening is parents stop, they stop complaining. Their children end up suffering because the parents get so fed up."

This sense of being ignored was a common theme when parents discussed their interactions with schools, social services and CAMHS.

3.1.4 Success of the Parent Champions

Although the VRU parent champions are relatively new, their enthusiasm and commitment suggest that they could develop into an established local network. As one parent champion explained

"Yeah, it's difficult, but we're not giving up; we're here, we parents are here to stay."

Another commented

"I was at home quite bored. And I just wanted to utilise my time and educate myself properly on what's really going on. So, like, one of my friends had issues with their kids. And because I could identify, like similar things in my life."

The champions themselves have a wealth of professional and personal experience contributing to their dynamism. For example, many have had personal experience of

knife crime, others have been foster parents, and some have children with SEND or ASD, at the same time as having wider professional experiences, which the Champions have utilised.

The remit of the Parent Champions expanded throughout the project, and it became apparent that additional support was needed to support the members' immediate and long-term vision. Therefore, the project partnered with several other organisations supporting parents, including Parent House, Choices CIC, and the British Somali community. For example. The additional support from Choices CIC has helped the Champions formulate their ideas and explore how to ensure their groups are resourced going forward. This reassured the groups as they explore practical considerations such as whether the parent champions remain a loose network or should they take on a more formal character. Currently, the proposal is to expand the group's membership and become a foundation.

The success of the parent champions is partly due to the empowering and supportive nature of the project staff. Some parents commented that they had approached youth safety focused organisations with ideas of how to support parents and educate the community on knife crime but were rebuffed. However, they had been encouraged to develop their ideas within the parent champions group. The informal nature of the parent champions led to a supportive, friendship like character in the group, which means that it bridges the spaces between the professional, the voluntary and the personal. One Parent Champion described the group as

"We meet informally as a team all the time and talk through things; it's a really, really supportive space. So, I think having those spaces and those discussions are exactly what we need in social care."

Another commented

"We all have our own areas of interest and expertise, but we complement and support each other; we spur each other on."

This embracing of each other's skillsets led to the group developing new ideas, including producing podcasts about the issues they were going through. Despite not having experience in this field, their self confidence and support offered organised by project staff led them to take on the challenge, as one Parent Champion explained

"The podcast data, we've ever done anything like that. But I've got quite a lot of things I want to talk about. Because I think although there may be groups out there, I don't think they're touching base on the things that I would like to talk about."

This empowering social space has led parent champions to provide help to those around them, including advocating for parents in meetings with schools, helping parents access services and acting as an appropriate adult when dealing with the

police. For example, one Parent Champion acted as an appropriate adult when someone in her network's son was arrested and helped ensure that the son was found a temporary foster placement to get the family additional support.

3.1.5 Parent Champions Boundaries and Support

As the parent champions start to offer more professionalised support, they will have to consider what boundaries should be in place to ensure that they do not become overwhelmed. As they encounter similar experiences to the Parental Empowerment Practitioners, they will need to access some form of reflective practice or group supervision space. Given the role that parent champions are starting to take in the community, the following training was suggested as essential for parent champions to do their role effectively

- Developmental psychology and adolescent brain development
- Trauma and Trauma informed practice
- Cultural Competency

Without this training and access to clinical supervision or a facilitated reflective space, it would not be appropriate for the Parent Champions to take on some of the responsibilities they have. However, if appropriately supported, they can become a vital additional community resource.

3.1.5 Parent Empowerment Recommendations

Giving parents access to professional training has increased the capacity of participants to engage with and support their own children and support others in the community. Although the Social Switch training was of benefit, those attending the training commented on the responsiveness of the training organisers as key to the programme's effectiveness. There is a clear need for this type of training programme to continue and potentially be rolled out across London. If there is a wider rollout, a local approach should be maintained to allow parent champions and other local support networks to emerge and organisers to respond to local needs. The parent champions groups provide a way for parents to engage in a way that established organisations often fail to do and have increased the capacity of support within the two boroughs. If adequately supported, parent champions groups could provide support that helps prevent families need to access further services. The following is therefore recommended

1. The project should consider how it can engage more fathers in all aspects of its delivery
2. London VRU to consider if the E-learning programme that provides parents access to professional training on issues such as internet safety, ECHP processes, Trauma Informed Practice, supporting young people with SLCD, ASD, mental health and learning difficulties should be continued and expanded in a localised way across London

3. The programme should include more opportunities for parents to build their friendship networks, possibly by allowing more time during online sessions for participants to get to know one another
4. If further Parent Champions groups are to be established across London, they will need facilitating and support to develop organically
5. Parent Champions should have access to group supervision and reflective practice spaces

3.2 Family and Transitions Support

This section considers the direct support offered to families through the family support work and the transitions programme, which were part of the original project plan. Initially, support was meant to be focused within the geographic areas of WC1, EC1, NW1 and Caledonian Road. However, although many referrals came from these locations, those from a wider area were also referred. In addition, many of the parents involved in the family support indicated that they had issues with their own mental health or thought they had ADHD or had Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

3.2.1 Family Support

The family support programme was aimed at families who have experienced domestic violence and where there are low level concerns that universal services have not yet picked up. As such, the cases should not have been complex. With the aim of the engagement being

"Really low level; we want to empower parents and prevent them from accessing further services. We want to upskill them and instil confidence."

Despite this, some cases needed substantial input and 50% were stepped up to social services, and 33% were referred to family support. Although it was felt that these more serious cases would have accessed either Early Help or Social Services at some point, the Parental Support programme did act as a catalyst to make this happen quicker.

In delivery terms, the programme offered what can be considered typical family support work. However, there was a greater focus on building relationships to deliver interventions. As a result, the delivery felt different to what service users were used to. Parents supported by the project commented

"She understood me. Anytime I would tell her stuff. She, she, she didn't ever doubt what I was saying. She was like if this is what you feel, you believe that you're, you're most likely right. And that's a good workout. Everybody should be like this."

"[The VRU worker] seems like the only person to listen to me."

"I had three social workers in four months: that's not normal. I had [my VRU worker] for nine months."

Service users experienced the care through simple but significant actions such as not closing their case straight away if it was being escalated to Children's Social Care services so that the VRU worker could help with the handover. This was particularly important considering that some families already had multiple professionals come and go before the VRU Project working with them. Service users commented on this relational approach as crucial, setting the VRU Family Empowerment Project apart from other services, which were often viewed in a far less positive way. Service users commented

"I've tried a lot of things. I think you feel judged when you have a difficult child; people think it's your fault. But I didn't feel any judgment with [the VRU worker]. Sometimes she would just ask, you know, perhaps why don't you try this. Something' leading to this negative outcome, what can you try that's different?"

"I don't have a great support system, and I've got my mental health issues. And I just believed I couldn't deal with certain things. But the VRU has really, really supported me. I had a great key worker; he was really good. He taught me a lot of things."

"I had contact with the other services, but it didn't feel dynamic. I feel [the VRU worker] is more dynamic. She carries out her intentions. She sticks to her word, which I think is really important."

The equal focus on relationships and processes helped project staff support service users through difficult situations, including being referred to social services. One family worker explained:

"I really know my families well, so I can be upfront when I need to refer them. Because of my relationship with them, I can say because of XYZ, I need to raise a safeguarding concern or refer to social services and not have a backlash from a parent. This is because of the relationship we have with our families."

However, this approach did bring its concerns, particularly around boundaries as the project was developing. Due to the newness of delivering during COVID 19 restrictions, initially, the staff were more willing to have relaxed boundaries around the length of intervention and when families could contact them. However, it became apparent that some service users started to rely too heavily on the support given, and so clear boundaries were established. One staff member commented

"I learnt I needed to be really clear, that I am here, I'm listening, and I care, but we are not friends; I am a professional as I was having people call me up all the time for all different reasons. But then we changed our approach and found a

space in the community where parents could come and visit in a time bound manner to discuss things. Then I didn't have parents calling me and texting me all the time because they knew when they could come to see me."

The concerns around boundaries were partly due to the staff member's desire to build strong relationships with the families they were supporting without necessarily being able to meet them face to face. Relatedly staff were keen to ensure families had a different experience of service delivery than they may have previously received. However, even with clear boundaries in place, there was the flexibility for staff to meet the needs of families dynamically. Often the staff response to issues families presented was

"If it is in our skillset, we should do it."

However, this was commented on as potentially masking the broader issue that some of the service users were fearful of working with other services

"Staff really want to help and would go the extra mile, which was very helpful in some cases."

The support given to families was based on taking the time to build trusted and meaningful relationships with the parents rather than simply relying on assessments of need. This approach helped parents feel more supported and at ease when being stepped up to Social Services due to the established relationship. However, before the project manager established clear boundaries for the team, which were reinforced during clinical supervision, some indicated that staff may have taken on responsibilities that other services should hold. This may have filled a short-term gap but didn't necessarily address the personal and system barriers that stopped families from accessing the support they needed. Considering that most cases required referrals to additional services, it may be more strategic to see the family support programme as an intervention that aids families access support services rather than a support provider.

3.2.2 Transition Project

The transitions project was set up to support children when moving from year 6 to year 7. Initially, the programme focused on helping children understand some of the risks around grooming and gang activity that they may be exposed to and worked to build their confidence and self-esteem. However, it also became apparent that one of the most effective outcomes was friendship making amongst participants. Therefore, the programme was adapted to ensure this was an additional key focus.

The VRU funded programme had two cohorts of children/young people, with one group from Camden and one group from Islington in each cohort. Participants were recruited from primary schools in the EC1 postcode area, which crosses the Islington

and Camden boundary. However, the young people the schools identified as needing the support did not always live in the identified catchment area. Table 5 below outlines the young people's primary and secondary schools.

Table 5: Schools Engaged			
Primary Schools	Borough	Secondary School	Borough
Edith Neville	Camden	Central Foundation	Camden
St Pancras and Argyle.	Camden	Regents High	Camden
St Mary's	Camden	Maria Fidelis	Camden
Hugh Myddelton Primary	Islington	Mary Magdalene	Islington
Moreland Primary School	Islington	Marylebone Boys	Islington
St Luke's	Islington	Central Foundation	Islington
St Andrew's	Islington	Westminster School	Islington
Vittoria	Islington	Highbury Grove	Islington

Although the transitions project had specific workers for Camden and Islington, there was a concerted effort to ensure that young people from each area regularly mixed with those from the other local authority. This was to try and foster friendships that would be a model which may mitigate any future location-based hostility.

The transitions project started working with pupils during the summer term of year 6, 20/21, and the support continued for the first two terms in year 7. Activities included 1:1 sessions to discuss specific issues at school or home, group sessions, trips and days out and themed sessions during the school holidays, including delivery in partnership with Arsenal in the Community. The regular weekly/fortnightly activities were with each discrete group, with the groups joining each other for the school holiday activities. The mix between school and community sessions meant that the focus was not entirely on school and provided young people with a sense of being supported holistically, with sessions also considering home life and wider friendship dynamics.

The 1:1 sessions took place in schools and the community, with Sommers Town Community Youth Centre in Camden, and the LIFT youth space in Islington was used for group sessions. These locations allowed participants to mix with other local young people that used the venues and helped foster positive peer friendships.

For the young people, the project made a profound difference, with young people recognising that they were:

- More confident at school
- Getting into less trouble at school
- Making friends more easily
- Able to ask for help at school
- Better able to regulate their emotions at school
- Confident enough to start new activities without feeling anxious
- Able to do more with less supervision/support

This personal development has helped make school tolerable and even enjoyable for young people for whom school could have been deeply problematic. Young people spoke of having friends they did homework with, being proud of the merit points gained at school and feeling confident to try new things. It was also noted that the participants' emotional intelligence had developed significantly, and one young person recounted how he supported someone who was lost to find their way to school. Table 6 shows the main identified benefits of the Transitions interventions

Table 6: Transitions Intervention Benefits			
Benefit	Intervention	Evidence	Evidence Source
Young People engaging school	1:1s, support plans and advocacy	Decrease in detentions Increase in time spent in the classroom Increased school 'merit points' and decreases in 'demerit points'	Young people's comments in observed sessions
Increased confidence	Activities to help build friendships	Young people reported excitement to start new activities which they previously wouldn't have done	Young people's comments in observed sessions
Developed Emotional Development	1:1s Wellbeing and emotional development activities within group sessions	Young people care for others around them	Feedback from Practitioners Session Observations Young people's comments

3.2.3 Transition Programme Effectiveness

The transitions project worked with the young people in an informal, supportive manner, which the young people noted contrasted with what they had previously experienced. Four of the participants commented that initially, they thought that their transitions practitioner was 'another social worker' but soon realised that the project was different from what they had previously known. This recognition was partly due to how the practitioner engaged with the young people and tailored the activities to their needs, including providing food when there were welfare specific concerns.

However, selecting the right young people for the intervention was key to its effectiveness. Staff commented that some young people within the first cohort had extremely complex needs, including suicidal ideation. Therefore, practitioners' time was mainly spent on crisis management, which took away from their capacity to work with young people on personal and social development. Within the second cohort,

there was a greater focus on supporting young people with SLCD or issues such as ADHD, which enabled more development work to be done with the young people.

The transition practitioners played an essential role in advocating for young people. This included dealing with issues such as helping young people get a time out pass, putting interim action plans in place whilst EHCP assessments were made and ensuring teachers read and understood individual young people's EHCPs. Parents explained

"[The transitions worker] has taken a lot of the burden off me by helping communicate with the school because the communication has broken down. Since they have been involved, I've noticed that the school is more proactive."

"[The transition worker] has been responsible for getting the school to make change around educational needs. I think if I tried to do that on my own, I'd probably still be bashing back and forth. But she's managed to get a response far quicker than I ever would have been able to."

Reflecting on their role, transitions staff commented they often provided additional resources to already stretched school staff, which aided a more proactive response to the needs of those supported by the transitions intervention. This was key in ensuring young people, some of whom were waiting for ECHP assessments, received the support they needed.

3.2.4 Family and Transitions Support Recommendations

The Family and Transitions Support programmes built their delivery around building relationships with service users that made parents feel listened to, often for the first time. The less formal delivery style helped parents and young people engage effectively with project staff, and the connection between both programmes helped ensure smooth referral pathways between the two. The relational approach also ensured that service users felt supported when referred to other services. However, there were concerns that staff may have found maintaining boundaries difficult, mainly when cases were more complex than the service was designed for. When developing similar services in the future, the following recommendations should be considered.

6. The council should consider whether the current family support casework offer is strategically appropriate or whether its resources are better placed supporting families engage other existing services
7. The less formal relational approach has clear benefits, and the councils should explore whether this is suitable in other settings, with the support the VRU project provided to establish clear boundaries with service users
8. When referring families and young people who have experienced or are at risk of violence to other services, extended handover processes should be explored as an option.
9. More work needs to be done working alongside schools and other educational establishments to improve engagement with parents

3.3 Project Set Up and Organisation

3.3.1 Cross Borough Working

The rationale for working across the borough boundaries was twofold. First, the porous nature of borough boundaries means that young people may live in one borough but may go to school or socialise in another. Secondly, there are identified gang rivalries that straddle both Islington and Camden, most notably in the WC1, EC1 and NW1 areas.

Initially, the proposal was for each local authority to employ the project staff for their borough. However, a Camden Council COVID-19 related employment freeze meant Islington Council employed both the staff that covered their borough and also Camden. For team dynamics during a period where staff were mainly based remotely, this had the benefit of all staff members experiencing the same support and organisational structure. However, it did pose some challenges for Camden focused staff when they tried to interact with Camden Local Authority services. For example, as Islington Council employed the project, employees had challenges around:

- Being recognised as delivering a Camden Council Service
- Accessing Camden Council databases and systems
- Making internal referrals to other council services

Therefore, partnership working agreements ensure that project staff can access relevant local authority IT systems and the project is fully integrated into all council early help and social service processes.

3.3.2 Project Set Up and Logistics

Although the project could have used the existing Early Help referral and reporting systems and processes, the project team decided to develop their own. This 'blank slate' approach allowed staff to bring their own ideas and develop bespoke processes, which were seen as less bureaucratic and facilitated easier engagement with service users. Staff commented that

"We initially keep it simple as making notes and asking too many questions, especially when you first meet someone, can be off putting."

The project structure also contributed to initial delays, with all operational decisions needing to go through the Parental Support Project Manager. During the initial stages of the project Parental Support Project Manager needed to:

- Approve all promotional material
- Approve the referral and reporting systems and processes
- Promote the project
- Agree on thresholds for the project, including those being referred in and those needing to be referred on

- Set up the training element of the project

Clinical supervision and reflective practice spaces were introduced to support staff wellbeing and practice. This proved very effective as a space for the staff to talk through their cases' impact on themselves and their practice and reflect on how what they have learnt during their service delivery can support future cases. This reflective space was also essential as the pandemic has increased cases' complexity.

3.3.3 Referral Process

Initially, referrals to the project were slow due to the project starting as the country was going into the first Covid 19 lockdown setting up at the start of the pandemic and the first lockdown. This led to low initial service user numbers and contributed to the project initially taking on my complex cases than it was designed for. However, as the project became more widely known, services referred to the project, and there were also increasing self-referrals as the project became more established. Table 7 shows that the primary referrer to the programme were schools (46% of referrals supported), yet this reflects the project's increased focus on education support. Of those receiving family support, 57% referrals were from other council services, 29% were from the Transitions element of the project, and 14% were self referrals. The project structure made referrals into the family support element of the VRU Parental Support Project were actioned swiftly. This compares to Islington Council's Early Help service, where the most common referrers over the past three years were other council services (22%), health services (18%), school (18%), police and the criminal justice system (16%), and self and family and friend referrals (14%). The project was heavily reliant on referrals from other council services, which is in part due to the newness of the service. However, as most families supported were referred to social services or family help, the data suggests that the programme supported many families who were initially adjudged not to meet the threshold criteria for other interventions to access the help they needed.

Table 7: Main Refers to the Parent Empowerment Project Compared to Early Help Refers

Parent Empowerment Project		Early Help	
Council Services	57%	Council	22%
Transitions Programme	29%	Health	18%
Self Referrals	14%	School	18%
		Criminal Justice System	16%
		Self referrals and those from family and friends	14%

3.3.4 Project Set Up and Organisation: Learning and Recommendations

There is some clear learning coming out of the project set up and organisation analysis that should be considered for future project delivery.

10. A shared process should be established to ensure staff can access the relevant systems and processes across all local authorities involved to avoid delays to service users.
11. Strategic and operational oversight should be shared by all local authorities involved.
12. A set up and promotion period should be built into new projects delivery plans to ensure that potential referrers understand the services offered.
13. Other partners working with service users should seek to adopt the empowering ethos of the VRU Parent Empowerment Project.

4. Summary and Recommendations

The VRU Parental Support Project was based on the premise that parents are often best placed to keep their child(ren) safe. If parents are empowered to understand some of the issues young people face and engage with their child(ren) better, they could mitigate many of the risks associated with youth violence without accessing other services.

The project empowered parents by providing professional training on topics such as online safety and county lines and grooming, as well as topics identified by parents such as how to support young people with SEND, understanding mental health and communicating effectively with young people who have speech and language difficulties.

The training led to the development of one parent champions group, who had access to additional training to help them develop new skills that they identified as necessary to their future plans.

To date, there are ten parent champions who have disseminated the Social Switch training to their networks, helped facilitate other training sessions and provided crisis support within their communities. However, the role that champions are starting to take on in the community means that they will need further training and also access to appropriate supervision or reflective practices spaces in the same way that is provided for professionals.

The family support programme provided support to families, many of whom had a history of domestic violence. While the project was in its infancy, some of those referred needed more crisis management than the intervention was designed for, which limited the empowerment work that could be done with the parents. However, as referrers understood the project better, this ceased being a problem. Staff members

were identified as more caring and proactive than those from other services, which led to parents being more responsive to the suggested interventions. However, the willingness to address issues as they arise and the desire to ensure parents felt listened to and supported.

The Transitions Practitioners acted as vital advocates for the children, helping to ensure schools put support plans in place for the young people. This was a key component of the project's success as most young people had SEND or additional needs or were suspected of having such and were awaiting assessment. The practitioner's involvement helped schools have the capacity to respond to the needs of those supported, helping the young people transition to secondary school more effectively.

The children supported by the transitions programme spoke of being able to cope better with school. This was partly due to the adaptations the transitions practitioner had managed to get schools to agree to and the children's increased awareness of coping strategies. Those supported also spoke of being able to make friends easier, which broadened their peer support network. Overall, respondents have demonstrated greater resilience when issues arise and more confidence to try new things.

The VRU Parental Support Project has demonstrated the value of a relational approach to empowering parents to support their children and the community more widely. It was clear from staff that they wanted to build the project around a relational response to parents' concerns, which for parents established the support as different to what they may have previously encountered. Although other services may offer similar types of interventions, the Parental Support Project provides a blueprint of how to ensure parents feel valued, listened to and able to address issues that they, their families, and the wider community face.

4.1 Recommendations

1. The project should consider how it can engage more fathers in all aspects of its delivery
2. London VRU to consider if the E-learning programme that provides parents access to professional training on issues such as internet safety, ECHP processes, Trauma Informed Practice, supporting young people with SLCD, ASD, mental health and learning difficulties should be continued and expanded in a localised way across London
3. The programme should include more opportunities for parents to build their friendship networks, possibly through allowing more time during online sessions for participants to get to know one another
4. If further Parent Champions groups are to be established across London, they will need facilitating and support to develop organically

5. Parent Champions should have access to group supervision and reflective practice spaces
6. The council should consider whether the current family support casework offer is strategically appropriate or whether its resources are better placed supporting families engage other existing services
7. The less formal relational approach has clear benefits, and the councils should explore whether this is suitable in other settings, with the support the VRU project provided to establish clear boundaries with service users
8. When referring families and young people who have experienced or are at risk of violence to other services, extended handover processes should be explored as an option.
9. More work needs to be done working alongside schools and other educational establishments to improve engagement with parents
10. A shared process should be established to ensure staff can access the relevant systems and processes across all local authorities involved to avoid delays to service users.
11. Strategic and operational oversight should be shared by all local authorities involved.
12. A set up and promotion period should be built into new projects delivery plans to ensure that potential referrers understand the services offered.
13. Other partners working with service users should seek to adopt the empowering ethos of the VRU Parent Empowerment Project.

Appendix 1 E-Learning Evaluation

Parent Empowerment Training Questionnaire Analysis

The first question asked parents where they had heard about the training. 28.6% were informed of the training through the council. The next highest response at 14.3% found it online. The third highest response (10.7%) showed that participants found the service through a friend. Chart 1 displays the importance of the council interacting with their communities and promoting these services to assist them. Equally, it shows the effectiveness of the internet and social media in connecting the government and its citizens. Additionally, it shows how word of mouth can effectively get people involved.

Chart 1: Where did you hear about the training?

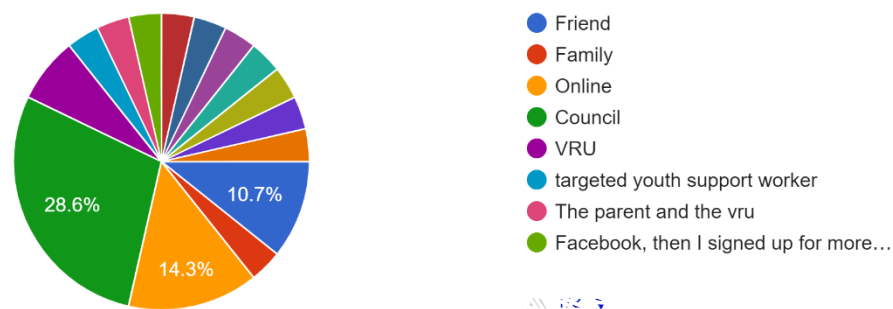


Chart 2 shows that most of the parents' children (67.9%) were under 18.

Chart 2: Are you are parent of a child under 18?

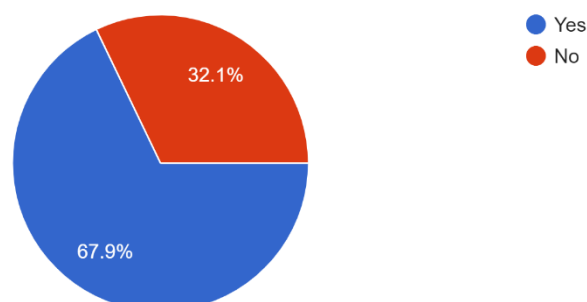


Chart 3 displays the age range of the children that training attendees had. 65% of the children identified through the survey were 13 or under, which would suggest that such

training can play a preemptive role and help parents identify some of the risk factors their children may face in the future.

Chart 3: How old are your children?

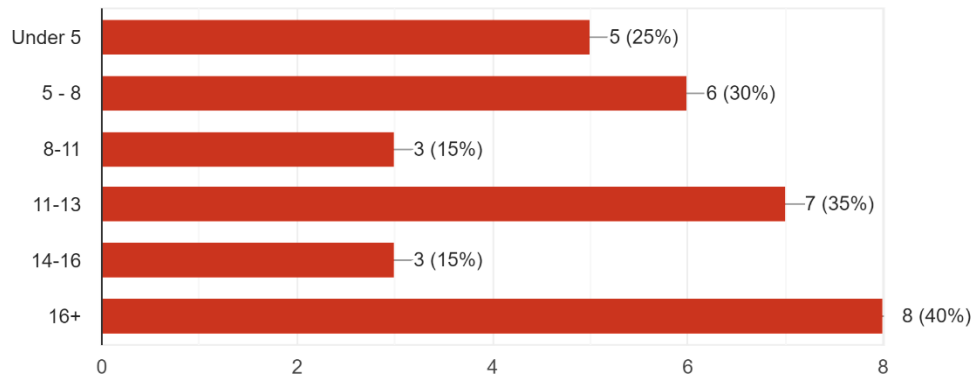


Chart 4 displays the parents' opinion of the quality of training delivery of the programme. 71.4% of the respondents gave the training a 5 out of 5. 25% gave it a 4, whilst (3.6%) gave it a 3.

Chart 4: On a scale of 1 - 5 how, well was the training delivered? 1= very disorganised, 2 = disorganised, 3= it seemed okay, 4 = it was well organised, 5 = very well organised

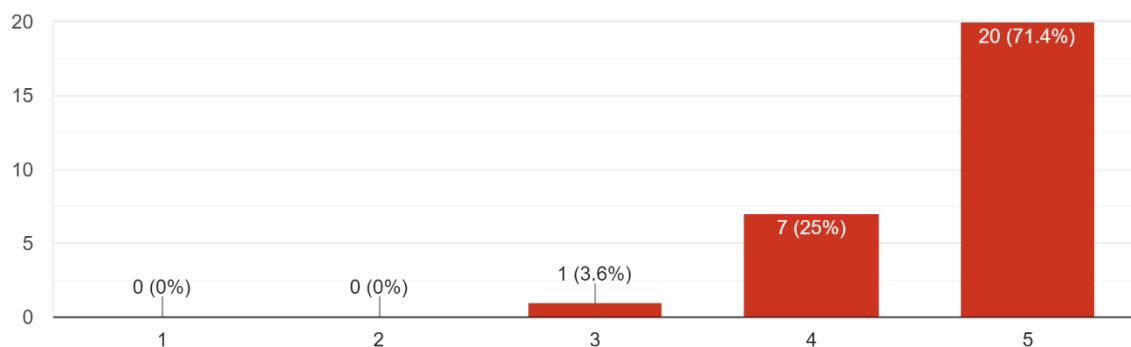
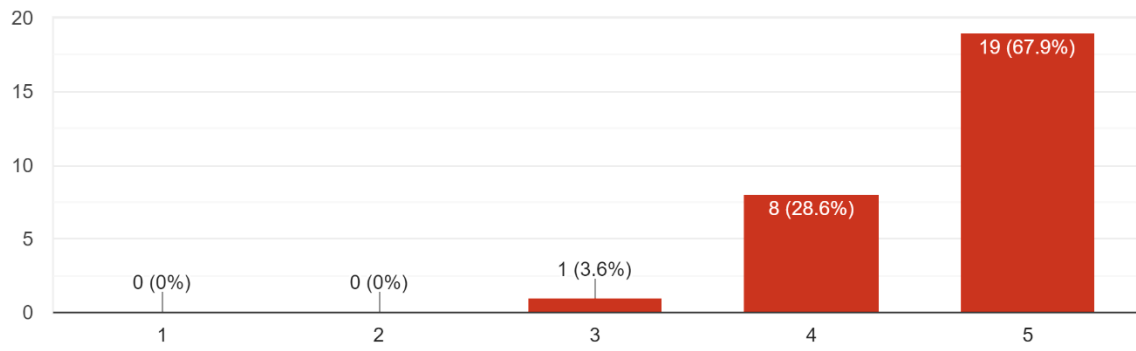


Chart 5 shows the participants' rating of how much practical knowledge the training provided on a scale of 1-5. Like the previous chart, 67.9% (19) of the respondents gave it a 5 out of 5. 28.6% (8) gave it a 4, whilst again, only one gave it a 3 (3.6%).

Chart 5: On a scale of 1 - 5 how much did the training give you practical knowledge that you can implement? 1= no practice knowledge, 2 = very little practical knowledge, 3= some practical knowledge, 4 = a decent amount of practical, 5 = a lot of practical knowledge



Appendix 2: Parent Champions Schedule July -December 2021

Month	Meetings/Events
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent Youth Safety Forum co-facilitated by a PC • Youth Crime Board • VRU Parent Champions Network Meeting with guests • TYS & YOS Parent group
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversion Workshop • Community Safety Filming Project for new police recruits • VRU PC Meeting
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education Webinar • Parent Youth Safety Forum co-facilitated by PC • TYS & YOS Parent Group • Meeting Choices Organisation • VRU Monitoring Meeting • Taster Trauma Informed Training a Community Approach • Community Safety Violence Reduction Interview
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VRU Parent Champions Network Meeting with guests • Completed Conflict Resolution Training
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Safety Strategy Meeting • YOS and TYS Parents Group • Introduction to Supporting Young People's Mental Health • Let's Talk Islington
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEND Training • VRU Mayor's Office Team Meeting • VAWG Launch Islington • County Lines Webinar