

Co-production and Campaigning: Parent Carer Forums and local and national campaign groups

Parent Carer Forums and campaigning groups all want to affect change. Sometimes they are trying to affect the same change.

Co-production and campaigning are not mutually exclusive and both groups can work together towards the change they want to deliver.

Parent Carer Forums and campaign groups may be trying to influence the same change so it's important to recognise the benefits of each other's approach and find ways to work together to benefit the population they are trying to represent.

Definitions

Coproduction and the role of parent carer forums

Co-production is an equal and reciprocal relationship where everyone's knowledge and skills are used to create better outcomes.

The SEND code of practice (paragraph 1.13) clearly defines the role that parent carer forums play in co-production:

"Parent Carer Forums are representative local groups of parents and carers of children and young people with disabilities who work alongside local authorities, education, health and other services providers to ensure that the services they plan, commission, deliver and monitor meet the needs of children and families."

Using their direct experience of receiving services and living with SEND, Parent Carer Forums can help set the agenda and highlight where local services, processes, and commissioners are working well, or challenge when changes or improvements need to be made.

Parent Carer Forums work in a solution-focused way with their local partners to find the best possible outcomes and solutions for local families, with the resources that are available – and if those resources are inadequate, they are perfectly within their rights to challenge this.

The role of campaign groups

The charity commission defines campaigning as follows (section 2.4 (1) Campaigning and political activity guidance for charities):

“Campaigning: the commission uses this word to refer to awareness-raising and to efforts to educate or involve the public by mobilising their support on a particular issue, or to influence or change public attitudes. It also uses it to refer to campaigning activity which aims to ensure that existing laws are observed.”

Campaign groups and charities (such as Contact) can seek to influence the decision-making process or law on a specific local or national issue. A campaign can be intensive, time sensitive, and aimed at achieving a single goal. For example, campaigning against the closure of a local short breaks service or for more accessible toilets locally.

Campaign groups might use a variety of tactics like:

- speaking at council meetings
- organising a protest or petition
- speaking to the media to publicise the issue and their campaign
- using social media to raise awareness
- involving their local MP or other public officials
- using the courts via judicial review

Campaign groups can be very effective in raising the profile of their chosen causes, galvanising public interest, awareness, and support for the issue.

What prevents Parent Carer Forums from campaigning?

There are two main constraints to Parent Carer Forums entering into campaign activity:

1. Since February 2016, there have been limitations placed on the use of funds from government contracts for campaign activity. These have been written into each government contract, including that between the DfE and Parent Carer Forums.

2. Undertaking campaign activity is not consistent with the ethos of Parent Carer Forums who exist to co-produce with service providers, commissioners and policy makers. Parent Carer Forums strive to have a seat at the decision-making tables and influence in this way.

How can parent carer forums work with campaign groups?

These do not stop Parent Carer Forums *supporting* campaign activity when it aligns with their objectives – it simply prevents them from actively campaigning themselves.

Although Parent Carer Forums should not initiate, incite or run campaigns themselves, they can work with campaign groups in other ways such as:

- Sharing information with campaign groups about the representations and arguments that the Parent Carer Forum is making to decision-makers on the same topic as campaign groups. They should be clear about what they can and cannot share – Parent Carer Forums are often privy to confidential material and it is important that they do not break any confidences and compromise the co-production.
- Sharing information with campaign groups (and their strategic partners) about the impact of any planned changes to services. This can be done in a very “matter of fact” way (for example, this cut to transport services will mean that 52 children have to spend on average 45 minutes longer on school buses).
- Sharing campaign group information through the Parent Carer Forum’s social media channels, making it clear they are simply signposting (not endorsing) to local activity that may be of interest to members.
- Asking campaign groups to let their members know they can join the Parent Carer Forum. Please note that recent GDPR rules mean that unless you have specific permission, Parent Carer Forums cannot share their members’ information.
- Sharing information and comparing notes to maximise intelligence. Parent Carer Forums can then use this to communicate with decision-makers and help them understand how their decisions will affect families.

By working together, Parent Carer Forums and campaign groups can complement each other’s activities.

Managing relationships

The heart of co-production is trust and communication. Parent Carer Forums must ensure that their partners are aware of the activity they are undertaking by:

- Being clear internally what their governance documents (e.g. constitution, code of conduct policy) enable the Parent Carer Forum to do.
- Being clear with campaign groups from the outset that whilst the Parent Carer Forum may share some of the same aims, as an organisation they should not join in many of the campaign activities. Please note, there is nothing to stop individual members of Parent Carer Forums from joining campaign groups.
- Being clear with the local authority, the CCG and any other co-production partners about what they are going to be doing. Explain why they think it is the right action to further the views of their members and make clear that their own rules and the law enables them to do this. Be transparent and adopt a “no surprises” approach.

Summary

Sadly, there are no hard and fast rules with regards to campaigning.

Parent Carer Forums will need to make a judgement about what activity they want to engage in based on what their own governance documents enable them to do, what the impact on key relationships will be and the conditions of their grants and contracts from the DfE and any other organisations that fund them.

If Parent Carer Forums are in doubt, they can contact their Contact, Parent Carer Participation Advisor or their Regional NNPCF Steering Group Member for guidance.

How has the National Network of Parent Carer Forums worked with campaign groups?

The NNPCF is the independent national voice of Parent Carer Forums. Its vision and mission state that they aim to “create a culture of participation and co-production” to deliver better outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Campaigning activity is not within their remit because they are committed to co-productive methods to further their aims. However, they frequently work closely with campaign groups to further mutual aims. Partnering with campaign groups in this way is mutually beneficial - the work they do in raising public awareness helps the NNPCF to prioritise issues with decision makers and use their resources to extend the scale and reach of their work. Some examples include:

The NNPCF are supporters, but not members of the *Disabled Children’s Partnership* – a campaign group of the leading children’s charities that campaign for improved health and social care for disabled children and their families. They frequently share information with DCP leads about what their members are telling them, they share what they have learnt in meetings with officials and ministers and share publicity and links to DCP events and campaigns, most recently the “Secret life of us” campaign.

The NNPCF are members of the *Special Education Consortium* which is an independent group of organisations that seek to lobby and influence government policy. They are a member of the SEC steering group and endorse and share much of their output. For example, the NNPCF were signatories of the May 2018 letter to the press that described the scale and impact of funding cuts to services for children with SEND.

They also support campaigning organisations on specific requests or activities. For example, they worked closely with the policy team at *Contact* on their school transport campaign. They publicised the campaign and the final report and referenced the work they had done in their NNPCF talking point on Transport. Similarly, they often publicise information from campaign groups (including petitions) via their social media.