

Community engagement in a diverse inner-city area:

Scalable approaches to reaching families with babies and young children



Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) Community Engagement team

Introduction

Community engagement is an essential component of any public health programme. Effectively engaging communities around a shared goal will:

- + Ensure that the services are tailored to the actual needs of the community, making them more effective and relevant
- + Build trust and foster strong relationships, which are essential for encouraging participation and sustained involvement in the programme
- + Empower community members by giving them a voice in the decision-making process, which can enhance their sense of ownership

- + Build social capital and social cohesion, creating a network of relationships and a sense of unity that strengthens the community

LEAP's community engagement programme aimed to connect families with LEAP and local services and activities, build social capacity and connect families to each other. The community engagement offer was responsive and adapted frequently. It served as a distinct stand-alone programme as well as supporting the broad LEAP service portfolio.

Through their test-and-learn approach, the community engagement team developed four key principles for effective community engagement which underpinned the programme:

1. Work with, and be led by, families

LEAP's parent volunteers were known as Parent Champions. Parent Champions used their local knowledge to support other parents and carers and to introduce them to children's centres, LEAP services and broader early year offers. They were provided with the training and resources needed to help connect local families.

People in the Lead participation sessions provided the opportunity for parents of early years children to share their opinions, experiences and ideas. Findings supported and informed decisions, processes and the design of services and activities for our partners and practitioners.

"I was able to develop discussion skills and feel empowered both within the context of giving my opinion but also personally." — LEAP Parent, People in the Lead session, 2022

2. Develop connections and build trust

The Community Connector role aimed to bridge the gap between families' attendance at engagement events and their uptake of LEAP services. The Community Connector built trusted relationships with families and community partners and provided families with up-to-date information and easy access to support based on individual need.

"The connector role has been an asset to the Sharing REAL programme by organising signposting for the service and discussing upcoming opportunities to network with local families." — Catherine Keal, CLL Programme Manager, 2023



3. Develop a structured and appealing engagement offer

All community engagement sessions and events were developed, marketed, and delivered under the banner of three themed festivals across the year. This enabled us to keep our offers fresh and meet the needs of specific groups of families in the community. An online booking platform improved how families discovered and booked LEAP events.

Our Community Activities Facilitator was consistently present at our activities to welcome parents/carers and develop rapport with families.

— **“Adult conversation for me, engaging toys for him, the fire engine and the lovely food was brilliant. And the LEAP staff were really engaging and welcoming. Thank you for organising.”** — Parent feedback, Home from Home festival event, 2023

4. Invest in collaborative partnerships with local organisations

We partnered with four community organisations who were well-established and trusted within the LEAP area. The organisations employed LEAP Family Engagement Workers who developed and delivered varied sessions for parents, babies and young children tailored to their specific community needs.

We developed the CoCreate Fund to invest both money and time in partnerships with local organisations working with families from communities we had not yet reached.

We supported 10 community organisations to develop and launch the First 5 Lambeth consortium. It aims to ensure a legacy of partnerships working for the benefit of families with babies and young children into the future.

— **“I’ve worked in isolation and this network has made me feel more supported and energised than I have for years.”** — LEAP CoCreate Fund partner, 2022

Outcomes and reach

From 2017 to 2023 LEAP’s Community Engagement programme:

- + Delivered 10 Festivals including 1,824 different sessions and events
- + Reached 6,662 unique participants including 3,437 children

- + Recorded that these participants attended our activities 36,000 times

One in five families whose initial contact with LEAP was through community engagement activities used other LEAP services. These families:

- + Engaged with more LEAP services on average compared with families that first entered LEAP’s programme through other routes
- + Tended to engage with more sessions per service

