



## Family Voice 10th Anniversary Conference 14 March 2020

It seems incredible now that in the middle of March we were taking the decision to go ahead with our Conference. At the time, the government had not yet advised against large gatherings and there were no reported cases of COVID-19 in Norfolk. We took the decision to continue with as many precautions as possible, while recognising and honouring the fact that some families and providers would feel that this was too big a risk to take in their individual circumstances.

In the event, very many parent carers decided to come and most standholders and professionals took the same decision. Professionals from the local authority and health services continued with the stands, 'speed dating' and workshops they had undertaken to hold.

So despite the difficulties, this was our busiest Conference to date. Around 400 people attended, with over 250 parent carers and children and around 150 professionals. This year we were also delighted to welcome many young people and children with SEND, who reminded us of the whole reason we are all engaged in working to improve services.

We took the precautions that were then being advised, of course. Lewis, the son of our Chair, would not allow anyone to enter the Conference Centre without using the hand sanitiser. Elbow bumps, which replaced the traditional handshake, were everywhere to be seen and it is a mark of how quickly things have changed that these now seem positively intimate.



Our usual keynote speech was replaced by an opening ceremony. Our Chair, Tracey Sismey, took the opportunity to clarify Family Voice's role as a Parent Carer Forum and to introduce the theme of our Conference: by working together we can all achieve so much more for the families we care about.

This was highlighted by the fact that Tracey's talk was opened and closed by some of those young people. Dancers from the D4Dance Group from The Garage in Norwich performed some of the pieces they have been preparing on the theme of 'The Future'. They showed a future in which they were free to act independently but where support from their peers and others was quick to appear when needed. After Tracey's speech, Total Ensemble Theatre Company performed 'Embrace', a piece they developed for the enthronement of the new Bishop of Norwich. On their feedback forms, parents commented: "I thought that this year's conference opening ceremony was lovely. The performers were a credit to the groups." "Drama and dance performances were amazing." "Really enjoyed the performances during the opening ceremony – a wonderful thing to include!"





One of the aims of the Family Voice Conference is to offer as much information about SEND services as we possibly can and provide a variety of ways for parent carers to access that information, through workshops, stands or speaking to professionals on an individual basis. This year, based on feedback from parent carers last year, we ran an extra set of workshops through the lunchtime period, which gave us 11 workshops and over 270 spaces for parent carers to attend. Around 80% of parent carers attended at least one workshop, with a few parents accessing three.

The morning workshops included a **Q&A session on education, health, social care and local policing** in the auditorium with senior representatives of education, health and social care services and local policing, including Sara Tough, Executive Director of Children's Services. Parent carers found this a "great opportunity to have such a wide and honest panel" and to meet with other parent carers in similar situations.

Another popular morning workshop was **Supporting children at SEN Support in mainstream schools**, where there was standing room only. The workshop gave parent carers the opportunity to find out about the 'Provision Expected at SEN Support' (PEASS) document and how this could help them to have informed discussions with teaching staff at their child's school.

The **Direct Payment Support Service** team offered information and advice about how to access their service, while the **KIDS Mediation** workshop outlined the mediation process available to parent carers.

There were three lunchtime workshops. The **Positive experiences of hospital encounters** had to be modified slightly, as one of the presenters was unable to be present, but parents found it very informative. **Keeping it in the family**, presented by Jamie Walker from The WillMaker Group, gave a "very useful and interesting" presentation on why it is so important to make a will, especially if your children are vulnerable or in receipt of benefits. **Total Ensemble** gave a hands-on workshop, where young people could explore ways to express themselves and communicate through physical theatre.



The afternoon workshops included a presentation on **Preparing for Adult Life**, the new service for young people with SEND aged 14–25, in which parent carers were keenly interested. **Supporting your child to develop their communication skills** was reported by parent carers to be "very informative". There was also a "brilliant" workshop on **Reviewing an Education, Health and Care Plan** by Amy Pease of SENDIASS, where parents very much appreciated having "plenty of time for questions".

The workshop on **Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)** drew much interest from parent carers. This was an initial discussion around a subject about which Norfolk has as yet no clear or joined-up position statement. Professionals from CAMHS and Starfish Plus joined educational psychologists to talk with parent carers in true co-production, sharing knowledge and experiences. As a couple of parent carers put it, it was "demonstrating exactly the role of Family Voice" and showed "how by working together, changes can be made".







Family Voice works with many different service providers within the local authority, health services and voluntary organisations. This year, we celebrated this with a huge artwork that we called **The Big Picture**, which was based on the theme that by working together we can all achieve so much more for the families that we care about. A special thank you to our talented Administration Assistant, Emma Parncutt, for producing this amazing artwork.



We would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Norwich branch of the National Autistic Society for providing the Lego Club and a treasure hunt for children. The Lego Club was a fabulous opportunity for parent carers and their children to take some time out from the busy Conference and play in the relative quietness of the Conference Centre gallery.

In addition to the Lego Club, our own Membership Secretary, Kate Draycott, provided several amazing Family Voice Norfolk rocks for children and young people to find around the Conference Centre. Thank you, Kate!



This year we saw around 60 parent carers participate in the ever-popular speed-dating sessions with 16 professionals, who offered their time to talk one-to-one with parent carers. One parent said that the most useful part of the day was "the opportunity to speak directly with people ... so many people are accessible and having face-to-face conversations is invaluable." While another parent carer said, "I attended a speed-dating session with a health professional who was lovely and very approachable."

The stands are an incredibly important part of our Conference and each year we aim to include as many new organisations as we can to increase variety and interest for parent carers. Around 40 standholders offered a wealth of information, advice and support. Parent carers said that it was useful "talking to those on the stands that have a good knowledge of SEN children". Many standholders reported that they really valued the opportunity to meet and talk to parent carers and to share information about their services.





The Family Voice Facebook page now promotes hundreds of activities and sources of information and support for families with children with SEND every year. We decided to provide a stand at the Conference on which organisations that were unable to attend on the day could display leaflets and contact details. The stand was crammed with materials from flyers to sunflower lanyards.

Each year, the Family Voice Norfolk ambassador team runs its own stand, where parent carers are able to find out more about the work of Family Voice and sign up as a member or discover what it means to join the team. The Conference is open to all parent carers with children and young people with SEND. This year about 35% of attendees were not already members of Family Voice, with around half of this number wanting to sign up. Kate, our Membership Secretary, will be in contact with those new members so that their experiences can be reflected in the work we do with decision-makers and service providers.



It is always lovely to see the familiar friendly faces of parent carers and professionals who have attended many of our Conferences and continue to benefit from the day. However, over half the parent carers who attended were doing so for the first time, which shows how important it is for us to continue to promote this event with the help of educational settings and support groups. One parent said that the Conference was "very helpful and informative. Wish I had found it years ago."

Many of the workshop presentations can be found on the Family Voice website (<https://www.familyvoice.org.uk/articles-reports/conferences/>). If you would like a hard copy of the report, our chair's speech, or any of the presentations, please email [office@familyvoice.org.uk](mailto:office@familyvoice.org.uk) or write to us at Family Voice Norfolk, PO Box 1290, Long Stratton, Norwich, NR15 2HD.

Family Voice Norfolk would like to thank everyone who attended for making it such an amazing and successful day, and I would personally like to take this opportunity to thank the whole Family Voice team. I am very fortunate to work with some amazingly dedicated representatives, ambassadors and administration staff. Without them, an event such as this would not be possible.

Bernadette Pallister  
Administration Manager

