

## Introduction

Wooler is located in rural Northumberland. The Hub's catchment area encompasses a 10 mile radius of Wooler and members include primary schools, a children's centre, a playgroup and two childminders. Prior to the set-up of the Hub, many of the existing providers were part of the Local Authority's Early Years Network. The Hub was established to strengthen and rejuvenate this partnership, and to open up the network to other early years providers across the area. The Hub is coordinated and administered by an Early Years Consultant employed by the County Council.

## Success and Impact

One of the first activities of the Hub was a joint training session on 'Fostering Positive Behaviour' leading to the development of a joint policy on 'Promoting Positive Behaviour'. This had two key benefits: firstly, it enabled the different providers to become more familiar with each other through joint training, and secondly, providers now use a common policy for tackling behavioural issues. This joined-up approach has given the policy more validity and provided parents with the confidence that issues will be dealt with consistently across all settings.

Through visits to each other's settings, hub members get new ideas to use within their own settings. This has helped create an element of healthy competition, which helps raise standards and quality. At the same time, providers report that their dealings with other settings are now '*much more cohesive*' and that this has created a more '*supportive and equal Early Years environment*' and a community which is willing to offer mutual support and advice. They have noticed a real difference in the sharing of knowledge and practice, which leads to improvements in their own practice.

*"I feel more confident about calling Susan\* if I have an issue or want to discuss something, now we have open doors to each other's settings, which is great"* (Local provider)

The collaborative Hub approach has encouraged providers to think more about parents/ carers' needs within the local area and how they might be able to meet them as a partnership. In the past, the sparsity of the local area meant that providers were sometimes '*fighting for children*', which encouraged a more inward focused approach. Through the Hub, providers are now looking at gaps in the market and thinking of ways to fill them.

*"The Hub is encouraging us to think about how we can better support parents/carers as opposed to just developing our own interests"* (Local provider)

---

\* Name changed to protect identity

Finally, the development of the Hub is leading to an increased awareness, knowledge and understanding amongst parents of local childcare options through regular newsletters and a (future) website. This will enable parents to make more informed choices about how local childcare can meet their needs and, if blended childcare is needed, having better knowledge of the providers should increase the likelihood of them using this approach, which at the moment is very limited in its use. Linked to this, being a member of the Hub also provides the settings with an additional marketing opportunity.

## Challenges

The rural location is by far the main challenge for the Hub. It can be difficult to organise meetings at times and locations to suit all Hub members. Providers work different hours and the rurality of the area means that travel can be extensive. This is an ongoing challenge for the Hub and they are currently looking at flexible arrangements for addressing it, such as having the different settings hosting in order to vary the meeting places, and alternating day and evening meeting times.

## Learning

The experience of the Wooler Hub so far has revealed a number of key learning points:

1. **Diplomacy is important:** each provider needs to feel that they are equal to the others. It's an important balance to strike and different settings will have their own ways of achieving this. Wooler has benefited from having an EY consultant as the coordinator for the Hub who is independent and has experience of working with all the different providers.
2. **Build on what you already have:** make the most of existing relationships and build on them, even if this means you're starting small.
3. **Allow flexibility:** don't feel like you have to follow a certain Hub model, go with what works best within your locality. Where possible, also develop your own resources, this helps to develop ownership and partnership working at the same time.
4. **Start on a quick win that is driven by all involved:** Wooler began with the development of a behavioural policy. All hub members saw the benefit of this and were keen to engage with it. Having this 'quick win' at the start meant that the providers were able to recognise the benefit of being involved and collaborating in the Hub early on.

## The future

The development and activities of the Hub to date have '*laid foundations for more collaboration*'. Hub members want to continue to work together and are seeking ways to achieve this, for example through their shared passion for outdoor learning. In addition, they hope, in future, to act as a collective voice for rural issues – for example to provide feedback on how new policies introduced by the Government will impact rural areas.