



Small Steps Big Changes’ Family Mentors – recruitment of an innovative paid peer workforce in Nottingham

Family Mentors are a highly trained paid peer workforce that deliver the Small Steps at Home manualised evidence-based programme of child development and preventative health support to parents of 0–4-year-olds. Unique to Nottingham, the Family Mentor Service has been developed through [Small Steps Big Changes](#) (SSBC), funded through The National Lottery Community Fund’s ten-year A Better Start programme (2015–2025). Delivered by three Nottingham community and voluntary sector organisations, the Family Mentor Service supports families and improves children’s outcomes, alongside providing social value by recruiting and employing local people based on aptitude not qualifications.

The challenge:

SSBC utilises a test and learn approach to improve 0- to 4-year-olds’ outcomes in four ethnically diverse Nottingham wards. When consulted, local parents requested ongoing emotional support, reassurance and expertise around parenting in the form of a non-judgmental, peer-led, home visiting service.

The solution:

In 2015, SSBC launched the Family Mentor Service, which embodies the SSBC principle “Children at the heart, parent's leading the way supported and guided by experts.” The Family Mentor Service helps guide and support parents to achieve the best outcomes for their children through the delivery of an evidence-based, home visiting programme – Small Steps at Home, and other community-based activities. The concept is unique to Nottingham and benefits from nine years of test-and learn-with cutting-edge evidence and evaluation.

The Family Mentor Service is delivered by a paid peer workforce, employed by established community and voluntary sector partners (The Toy Library, Home-Start Nottingham and Framework Housing Association). Family Mentors are recruited from the local communities. Prior educational qualifications are not necessary for the role of Family Mentor. However, good literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to undertake on-the-job training are required. Family Mentors are parents, grandparents, and those with lived experience of parenting with a passion for parenting or caring for children, and a desire to help children and families to reach their full potential.

Family Mentor vacancies are advertised online and promoted locally. The job advertisements are posted in local community places and the organisation's Family Mentors and volunteers also discuss the recruitment and application process with parents they support. As for the Family Mentor Service in the ethnically diverse wards, applications from multilingual speakers are explicitly encouraged.

Shortlisted candidates are asked to attend a full assessment day. Activities on the assessment day focus on qualities such as team working, interpersonal skills, being able to offer non-judgmental support and time management. Candidates also take an English test on the assessment day. After the assessment day, candidates are invited to an individual panel interview. This gives the panel the opportunity to assess if the candidate would match well with families.

Successful candidates receive accredited on the job training at Level 2 (equivalent to GCSE). Tailored to meet Family Mentors' needs, the structured training is underpinned by the principles of trauma-informed practice: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration. It builds on their knowledge and expertise as parents and caregivers and aims to influence their thinking about, empathy towards, and understanding of, the families they work with. Many Family Mentors work in the area they live and they receive robust training in safeguarding and maintaining professional boundaries.

Additional support is given to staff to successfully meet training requirements. Many staff previously only used mobile phones for IT purposes, and so Family Mentors are upskilled in IT by means of bite size lessons. Candidates who fall short on the English test but are otherwise successful, are given support and six months to work towards Functional Skills English Level 1 and then tested again.

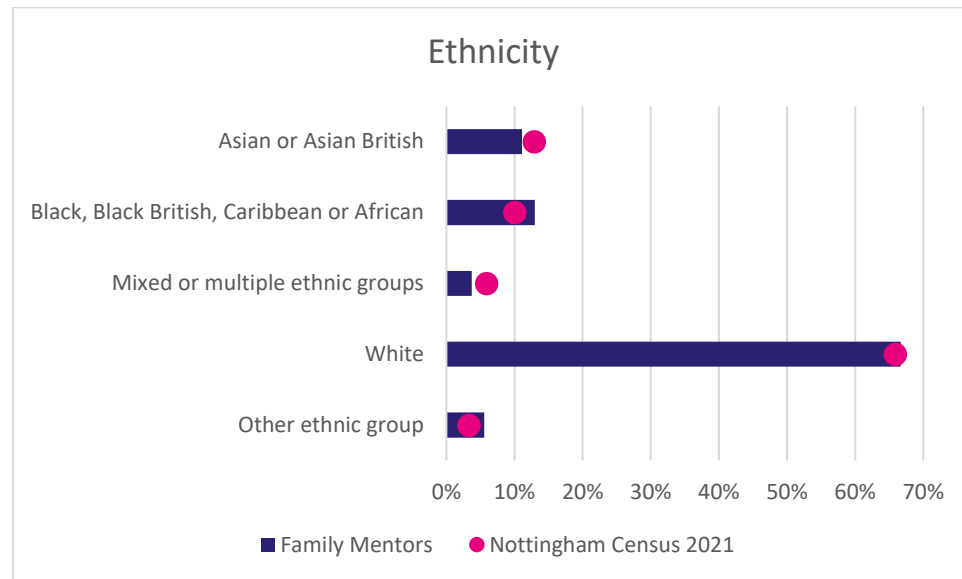
Continued professional development contributes to Family Mentors' ability to meet families' needs and system priorities. For example, Family Mentors received training around early years speech, language, and communication by the SSBC-commissioned Early Intervention Speech and Language Team at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust. Family Mentors became the largest source of appropriate referrals to their early intervention speech and language services (2022/23). Another example is that all Family Mentors received Trauma-Informed Training last year in order to support the Trauma-Informed Strategy agreed by the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Violence Reduction Unit.

An inclusive workplace is paramount to attracting and maintaining a diverse workforce. Although not all Family Mentor workplace premises offer dedicated prayer or quiet rooms, religious worship is accommodated by means of prayer breaks and colleagues creating a respectful environment.

The impact (including cost savings/income generated if applicable):

A workforce survey across the three Family Mentor Service providers shows that the Small Steps Big Changes' Family Mentor workforce shows demographic and social

similarities to the parents and caregivers they support. The FM workforce ethnicity profile closely matches the Nottingham Census 2021.



Framework operates the Family Mentor Service in more ethnically diverse areas of Nottingham and this is reflected in their FM workforce. While half of their FMs (15 FMs) identified as White in the survey, the other half (15 FMs) identified as having an ethnic minority background. Framework FMs speak a total of 17 different languages within their team. Matched with families with similar cultural backgrounds, multilingual FMs can deliver SS@H in their own home language.

The diverse workforce contributes to making the Family Mentor Service an accessible service for families. Currently, 1056 children are signed up for the Family Mentor Service, which means that 40% of eligible families living in the four SSBC wards engage with the Service. Family Mentors have delivered SS@H or community groups to 5328 individual children, totalling 111,668 interactions. 74% of children were living in the 10% most deprived Local Super Output Areas at time of sign-up.

Greater percentages of eligible Asian/Asian British and Black African Caribbean children currently benefit from the service (36.6 and 48.4% respectively compared to 35.1% White British). Non-English-speaking families in one of Nottingham City's Primary Care Networks rated FMs as one of the services most easy to access.¹

Evaluation of the Family Mentor Service is positive for children and families. External evaluations by Nottingham Trent University have shown the following positive findings.

- Children from SSBC wards who participated in the Small Steps at Home programme for more than 18 months had the highest mean scores both for

¹ Khan, Farah and McDonald, Amy. (2022). *Report on the experiences of accessing healthcare amongst non-English speaking families in Sneinton and St Ann's: Nottingham City East Primary Care Network (PCN6)*. [online] [Primary Care Network Report | SSBC \(smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk\)](https://smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk)

the overall 24-Month ASQ scores, and four out of the five ASQ domains, namely communication, gross motor, fine motor and personal-social scores.²

- An increase in the visits of Small Steps at Home led to an increase in the 12-month Gross Motor Scores, which was statistically significant.²
- An increase in Small Steps at Home visits led to an increase in the 24-month Fine Motor Scores, which was statistically significant.²
- There was a strong, positive association between the number of Small Steps at Home visits and 12-month communication scores. That means, an increase in the visits led to an increase in the 12-month communication scores.³
- Parents report improvements in the wellbeing and confidence of both parents and children, children eating healthier food options, and improvements in children's sleeping routines and behaviours.⁴
- Staff of Family Mentor teams reported perceived developments in children's confidence, language and communication, and improved English for children whose parents first language is not English. They also reported a perceived improvement in relationships and more interactions between children and parents due to the Small Steps at Home programme, as well as parents being more safety conscious.⁴
- Qualitative interviews that sought to understand parents' experiences of having a Family Mentor show that parents have a positive view on their relationship with their Family Mentor. Parents value Family Mentor's non-judgmental approach and the trusting relationship they build with them through regular contact. All parents would recommend the Family Mentor Service to a friend or family member if they were eligible.⁵

The Family Mentor Service also makes a wider social contribution to the local communities they work in and was awarded the Social Value Award in the 2023 Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board Health and Care Awards. The social contribution of the Family Mentor Service was evident in the workforce survey among 54 Family Mentors.

- Almost all Family Mentors are parents and live in Nottingham.
- 41% of Family Mentors volunteered before becoming a Family Mentor. Most of them volunteered at SSBC or one of the Family Mentor Service providers, highlighting the value of volunteering as a route to move into paid work.

² Lushey, C., Tura, F., Wood, C., Paechter, C., & Wood, J. (2020). *Evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes: interim report: January 2020*. [online] [Small Steps Big Changes Evaluation Report January 2020 Final.pdf \(smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk\)](https://smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk)

³ Tura, F. (2023) *Examining the relationship between Small Steps at Home provision and ASQ and EYFS data* [unpublished report]

⁴ Lushey, C., Tura, F., Paechter, C., Wood, J., Thompson, R., Wood, C., Huntington, B., Wardle, L., Fleming, J., Cassidy, S. and Jameel, A., (2019). *Evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes: first annual report 2019*. [online] [NTU Evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes 2019 | SSBC](#)

⁵ Harding, R., & Paechter, C. (2022). *Experiences of SSBC families in having a family mentor: report prepared for Small Steps, Big Changes*. [online] [NTU Evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes 2022 | SSBC](#)

- Family Mentor jobs attract new and returner job seekers. For 7% of Family Mentors their current job is their first paid work. For 28% of Family Mentors it is their return to work after not being in paid work for at least a year.
- Family Mentor employment shifted some households from being out-of-work to having someone in work. Before becoming a Family Mentor, 41% of Family Mentors did not have anyone else in their household earning an income from paid work. On average, Family Mentors saw an increase in household income after gaining employment in their role.
- 74% of Family Mentors work less than 30 hours per week. Part-time working facilitates staff's childcare needs. 35% of Family Mentors identify as single parents.
- Becoming a Family Mentor has led to self-reported increases in confidence in recognising and responding to safeguarding needs, working with computers, child development and building trusting relationships with families.
- Family Mentors report good job satisfaction and see the positive impacts of the Family Mentor Service on both themselves and the families they support. They feel prepared for a vast range of future job opportunities, both within and beyond early years career paths.

How is the new approach being sustained?

As a workforce, Family Mentors continue to update their knowledge based on family feedback and information from across the partnership. The Family Mentor Service will be extending delivery of Small Steps at Home on a small scale, through the Health Inequalities and Innovation Fund made possible by the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care Board. This fund provides resources to local projects aimed at reducing health inequalities by finding new ways of working. In line with the funding aims, the Family Mentor Service will be a targeted-selective intervention for families identified in collaboration with Midwifery, Children's Public Health 0-19 Nursing Service and other health practitioners and focused on the earliest stage of a baby's life from birth to twelve months. In addition, SSBC are currently exploring the licensing and copyright of the Small Steps at Home Programme so it can be used in other geographical areas.

Lessons learned:

- Initially, the concept of recruiting staff living in close proximity to service users was met with some reservations due to concerns about work-life balance and the nature of the Family Mentor work, which can be emotionally charged and includes child safeguarding. However, working in their own area of residence has generally worked well for Family Mentors and having lived experience of the communities they work in is a core component of the Family Mentor Service.
- On-the-job-training and additional support to complete these successfully when needed enable recruitment of people based on qualities rather than qualifications.

- The Level 2 accreditation gives recognition of the robustness and quality of the Family Mentor training programme.
- The Family Mentor recruitment process has given unsuccessful candidates the confidence to apply for and secure a voluntary role. Family Mentor Service providers support volunteers in gaining experience and accessing further training such as English as a Second Language (ESOL) lessons, with some volunteers subsequently gaining paid employment.
- Inclusive recruitment and workplace practices are paramount in attracting and maintaining a diverse workforce.
- Part-time and flexible working enable Family Mentors to maintain a good work-life balance.
- In addition to supporting families, the Family Mentor Service benefits the local communities in terms of community capacity building and accessible new and returner job opportunities.

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Link to LGA publications: [here](#)