

Loud and clear!

With the twos offer set to extend its reach in September, local authorities and providers should be taking a fresh look at how to communicate with eligible families. *James Hemsall* explains

As the offer moves towards its target of providing funded places for 40 per cent of all twos, there will be a shift from targeted referrals to a more publicly understood and accessed entitlement. This necessitates a sea change in the way in which we communicate with eligible families.

More than 100,000 of the least advantaged two-year-olds are currently benefiting from places and the aim is to work towards increasing this to 260,000 children in September.

To make this happen, awareness of the offer will need to be maximised on a local and national level. A combination of actions are required.

- Reaching and targeting families in greatest need, who are engaged through their contact with professionals.
- Targeting reach through direct contact with families using Department for Work and Pensions data and/or children's centre, provider or school intelligence.
- Widespread public messages.

There needs to be a considered approach. Many local authorities are more than aware of the need to manage expectations, ensure the programme helps families, and does not promote stigma.

In 2012, Achieving Two-Year-Olds (A2YO) commissioned 4Children to establish how this could best be done. The project included local authorities looking at the whole issue of communication and reviewing the bulging evidence base of ways in which the offer could, and should, be promoted. The results of this work are available in the form of a user-friendly, downloadable online toolkit (see more information column).

MAXIMISE YOUR REACH – A2YO'S CHECKLIST

Here we look at important things to consider and link them to the tools

and resources already available on the A2YO knowledge hub. Settings could also use this list to benchmark progress so far.

Getting the key messages right – based on research

The toolkit reviewed a great deal of research and best practice, and concluded it is important to:

- get the basics right

- keep language as simple as possible
- consider what parents need to know. The most important point is the fact that it is free; the background and terms and conditions can come later
- think about what information is right for different types of communication
- keep it positive
- emphasise the benefits for children and the quality of provision
- think about the balance of childcare and learning.

Use a jigsaw of methods

Use a wide range of communication options, including: leaflets, postcards, posters, newsletters, advertising, briefings, letters, press stories, visits and talks.

Get the message to the public

Whatever methods you choose, it is vitally important that the information you have is distributed ➤



CASE STUDY: PETERBOROUGH CITY COUNCIL

Peterborough City Council's Early Years and Children's Centre Service has set up a Facebook page (www.facebook.com/PeterboroughEarlyYears?fref=ts) to promote the two-year-old offer.

It is using it to encourage people to find out more about the free childcare for two-year-olds, but also to share other relevant early years and childcare news – including national news and local events.

A recent update shows that by the end of 2013, the service had 564 children accessing a free early education place

– 92 per cent of its target. For Peterborough, Facebook is part of a marketing mix that includes local media, leaflets, banners, targeted mail and outreach.

It also has a text messaging service, which was launched in September 2012 during the trial.

The main priority was to engage with parents in a different and accessible way, promoting the two-year-old funding offer. It also helped to cut down the number of unsuccessful applications received.

The idea is that the parent texts a number with the

word 'childcare' and their postcode, date of birth, surname and national insurance number.

Once the data is checked electronically, they get a response to say whether they qualify for free childcare or not and a signpost to find out more information about early education for three- and four-year-olds.

There were 196 enquiries between 1 September and 31 December 2013 and 68 per cent of texts were not eligible, showing how much time has been saved processing unsuccessful applications.

TWO-YEAR-OLDS

across the places where your target families actually visit.

This will vary from area to area. Options may include: supermarkets, surgeries, family centres, workplaces, pubs and clubs, community buildings, notice boards, shops and schools.

Assess your online presence

Have a look at the sites of other providers and consider any improvements that can be made to your own presence. The toolkit contains guidance on online strategies and the use of social media.

Build community links

Community action, groups and associations are where local communities get things done.

If you can supply information items for their meetings and newsletters, it will generate a level of interest and contact on your behalf.

Use the press and council leaders at the same time

By developing a series of positive press stories, you can not only benefit from free publicity but also involve your council leaders – thereby raising profile and political support.

The September milestones are obvious key dates, and other stories could focus on the 500th child funded, the 100th childminder registered to deliver, the first capital project completed with funding, or the launch of your online application process.

Work with providers, childminders and schools to spread the word

Many group providers, childminders and schools have come out in support of the two-year-old programme. If they want to provide places, they are going to be extremely motivated to circulate information and reach families who will be eligible.

Providing them with all your promotional material is vital, and arranging times to meet up on a one-to-one or group basis will reinforce your messages and their confidence in being able to support families and manage the system effectively from start to finish.

MORE INFORMATION

- 4Children toolkit, www.foundationyears.org.uk/library/two-year-olds
- *Nursery World* is running a conference, Two-Year-Olds: Policy and Practice, on 9 July, www.two-year-olds-conference.com

Promoting those providers who have experienced this and achieved results is a powerful way of showing others how it can be done.

Work with other professionals

Briefing all those professionals who come into contact with families in the course of their work is vital. But like parents, they need a multifaceted approach.

Simply sending an email with the relevant information will reach some, but not all. A communications plan for professionals could and should include: written information and professional briefings; leaflets,



Durham County Council created a DVD with messages for providers to pass on to parents

CASE STUDY: DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Durham County Council produced a DVD aimed at local childcare providers, which helps promote the benefits of childcare for two-year-olds, and encourages providers to pass on the message to families and prospective families they work with. The DVD was useful for building enthusiasm and dispelling any concerns or myths associated with the offer.

All providers and services were given leaflets, briefings, banners and application forms to advertise it. Childcare providers have distributed leaflets in the

places families regularly access – for example, supermarkets, doctors' surgeries, and via face-to-face handouts in local towns, but the most successful approach was to send a specially designed individual invitation to each potentially eligible child.

Families eligible for the offer are encouraged to access family and parenting support alongside their early education entitlement. This six-week programme, entitled Terrific Twos, is a combination of parenting support and home learning, supported by children's

centre staff working closely with daycare providers who make referrals of parents who may be eligible.

Strengthening partnerships with children's centre teams and linked services has been important – for example, with health visitors who have an application form available for use during the two-year-old progress check.

Partnership with the Portage service has proven useful for those who need to access additional support for children with disabilities, and The Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service for Traveller families.

posters and postcards; clear information on who to contact or talk to in the event of questions and queries; and attending or holding meetings, events or receptions to get people together to hear reinforced messages, meet key players and see the process having an impact.

Support parents to be champions for two-year-olds

Parents who have used their free learning for two-year-olds are highly effective advocates of the difference it will have made and can motivate even the most reluctant families to get involved.

The toolkit describes the benefit of parent champions, and of course we should always promote the inclusion of parents' voices in all communications about the programme. ■

James Hemsall is director of Hemsall's, www.hemsalls.com