



IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY CONNECTOR MODEL

Understanding and shaping paid peer support for your community

We see in many communities, the families who would benefit most from support are often the least likely to access it. Barriers such as confidence, trust, personal challenges, previous experiences of services and a lack of awareness can all prevent families from engaging with universal and early years services. The result is that services can struggle to reach those who need them most.

Over the last 12 years, Better Start has developed and refined their Community Connector model. Paid peer support designed to bridge the gap between services and communities. Rooted in trusted relationships and community insight, the model helps families access support whilst providing services with a better understanding of local needs.

Implementing a Community Connector model is about more than creating a new role in your system. It requires careful consideration of the needs, strengths and priorities of your community to ensure the approach feels bespoke, trusted and sustainable.

What is a Community Connector?

A Community Connector is a trained, knowledgeable local peer who acts as a bridge between communities and services. They are a familiar, approachable and trusted presence within their community, helping people understand what support is available and building confidence to access it.

Unlike other professional roles, Community Connectors are valued not just for what they know, but for who they are. Their local knowledge and lived experience gives them a unique understanding of the community, which helps build relationships that can be difficult for traditional services to achieve.

Community Connectors provide non-judgemental practical support, trusted information and consistent encouragement. They help families navigate services, strengthen their social connections and share important health and wellbeing messages in ways that feel accessible and relevant to them.

How are they different from other roles?

While Community Connectors may appear similar to outreach workers, navigators or engagement officers, their role is distinct.

The model is built on peer relationships rather than professional authority. It is designed to be non-assessment based, non-clinical and non-case holding. Community Connectors focus on building trust, reducing barriers for families and connecting them to support rather than delivering interventions themselves.

A key part of the role is creating a two-way flow of information. Community Connectors not only help families access services, they also bring valuable insight back to organisations, helping services understand what families need and where barriers exist.

This community intelligence is one of the most powerful parts of the model, helping services become more responsive, accessible and effective.

Shaping the role for your community

One of the most important lessons from Better Start's Community Connector service in Blackpool is that there is no single model that can simply be copied and pasted into another area.

Peer roles should be developed alongside local families, community organisations and practitioners. Co-design helps ensure the model reflects local priorities, addresses real needs and builds trust from the outset.

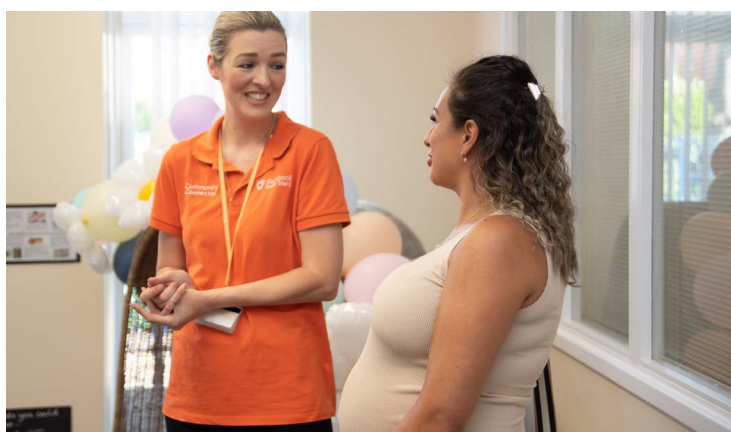


Developing a model of support

When starting to develop the model of support, questions to consider should include:

- What are the demographics of our communities?
- What challenges are local families facing?
- Who is currently missing out on support?
- What would families value from a trusted community role?
- Where are families already spending their time?
- Which local strengths and assets can the role build upon?
- How will the role gather and share community insight?
- What impact do you hope to achieve?

Taking the time to answer these questions with communities rather than for communities creates a stronger foundation for success.



How to engage with the community

Peer supporters are most effective when they are visible, accessible and embedded within everyday community life as an ongoing process rather than a one off activity.

Building relationships should come before promoting services, offers or meeting targets. Trust is developed through consistent presence, listening and meaningful conversations. Opportunities to spend time where families naturally gather and where informal, trusting connections can be built is key to the success.

Those places may include:

- Family hubs and children's centres
- Community venues and groups
- Healthcare settings
- Faith venues
- Schools and early years settings
- Parks and community spaces

Accessibility and communication methods also need to be carefully selected to ensure that any barriers to engagement are considered and mitigated against.



Planning for success

Successful implementation relies on more than recruiting the right people. It requires systems, support and infrastructure that enable individuals to thrive in their role.

Considerations should include:

- Inclusive and community-focused recruitment processes
- Recruitment workshops to support local applicants understanding of peer support and confidence to apply
- Role descriptions focused on qualities and transferable skills rather than qualifications
- Robust safeguarding and vetting procedures
- Community involvement in the recruitment process
- Alternative interview methods alongside traditional panels
- A thorough and supportive induction programme
- Shadowing and buddy arrangements
- Ongoing development opportunities including community engagement, early years and key health topics
- Reflective practice opportunities
- Clear role boundaries and expectations
- Ongoing coaching and supervision from a dedicated manager

Ensuring lasting impact

Implementing a paid peer support model, like the Community Connector role is not about introducing another service. It is about investing in trusted local people who can strengthen relationships between communities and services. When co-designed with local families and supported by the right infrastructure, a model such as Community Connectors can play a key role in improving engagement, increasing community voice and helping services respond more effectively to families' need.