



Cumbria Collaborative  
Outreach Programme



**HASKE**

HEALTH & SOCIETY KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE



# Parental assets and influence on young people's decision-making: engaging 'hard to reach' parents January 2021

This project was commissioned by Hello Future and conducted by Health and Society Knowledge Exchange (HASKE), University of Cumbria. The report was authored by Dr Tom Grimwood and Dr Laura Snell.

# > Introduction

The aim of this project was to explore the context of Cumbrian 'hard to reach' parents and carers, and the routes to engagement with them. This work built upon HASKE's previous work on an asset-based approach to widening participation, which mapped the variations of assets available to and engaged by young people in Cumbria.

Understanding parent's aspirations for their children in the context of their own social and cultural capital is key to improving the number of applicants to University, but this is all the more significant in deprived areas and traditionally 'hard-to-reach' groups.

## The project consists of the following:

- 1 An initial deep dive of literature concerning 'hard to reach' parents, focussing on the barriers and enablers to engagement.
- 2 The findings of the literature review were compared with those from Hello Future's parent and carer surveys in order to consider what the unique challenges Cumbrian parents may face.
- 3 Interviews with parents and carers: The findings were used to inform a number of email interviews to explore in more detail the context of Cumbrian 'hard to reach' parents and carers, and the routes to engagement with them.

# > Literature Review

The aim of the review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the main barriers and enablers to parental engagement.<sup>1</sup>



## > Defining 'hard to reach' parents and families

The term **hard to reach** can be problematic to define (Evangelou et al., 2013; Campbell 2011), and it has been suggested that **there are in fact 'degrees of "hard-to-reach"-ness'** (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012: 211).

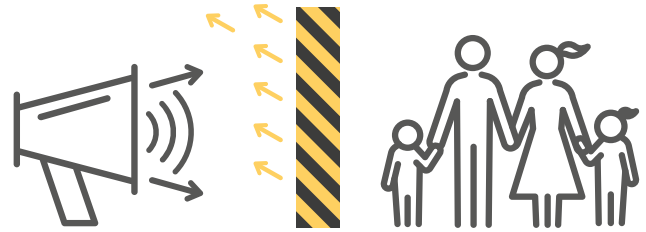
Some definitions and terminology have been criticised for implying that it is the parent or family that is hard to reach (Wilson 2020), rather than a service or organisation being hard for that family to reach.

Boag-Munroe and Evangelou believe that the term **hard to reach** can **'disguise the complexities of the lives of these families and the factors which lead to their disengagement'** (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2012: 209).

The narrative that parental problems affect educational aspirations has also been challenged by several researchers. Sime and Sheridan's study (2014) of a deprived area of Scotland found that while parents had 'limited volume of capital they could draw upon...', (2014: 339), they were still seeking the best opportunities for their children.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this literature review, the term 'parental engagement' has been used broadly to refer to familial and non-familial carers.

# Barriers to parental engagement



## Practical or logistical barriers

A further area to examine are the practical and logistical issues which can pose a fundamental barrier (or 'gate') to parental engagement. This includes aspects such as the cost, time needed, and transport required (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011), as well as location and opening times (Flanagan & Hancock 2010) of activities or interventions.

## Perceived barriers

In one study, many of the participants reported a perceived 'barrier' between schools and parents. Barriers can result in parents 'feeling alienated from, and even afraid of, the education system' meaning they are reluctant to get involved in their children's school life' (Watt, 2016: 37).

Informing such barriers can be previous negative experiences of accessing services (Flanagan & Hancock 2010) or a previous negative experiences of school (Campbell 2011). In some cases, as with Sime and Sheridan's work (2014), parents' lack of experience with education contributed to a reluctance to engage.

In others, negative perceptions of hard to reach parents coloured some aspects of service delivery (Flanagan & Hancock 2010) leading to poor experiences for all.

## Organisational barriers

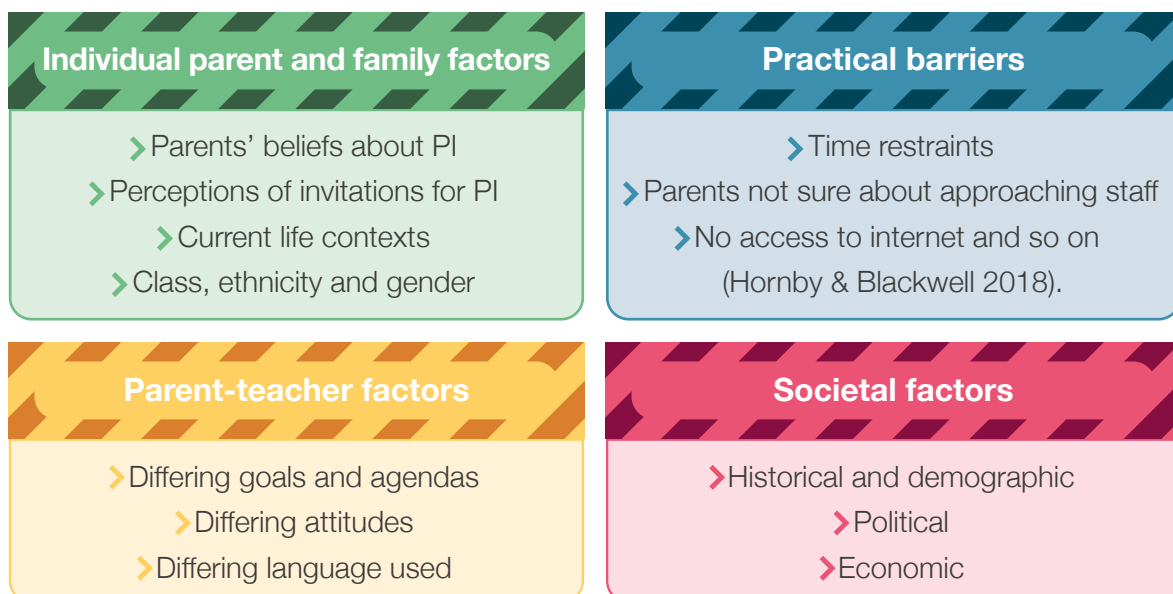
Organisational barriers were identified for hard to reach families accessing services in Boag-Munroe and Evangelou's literature review (2012), including:

- Communication (including culture, language, literacy etc.)
- Setting (e.g. lack of visibility within the community, unwelcoming settings, lack of effort by services etc.).
- Lack of consistency, lack of resources, poor quality of service, lack of infrastructure to do outreach work, high staff turnover, programme location, and allowing families to slip through the net.

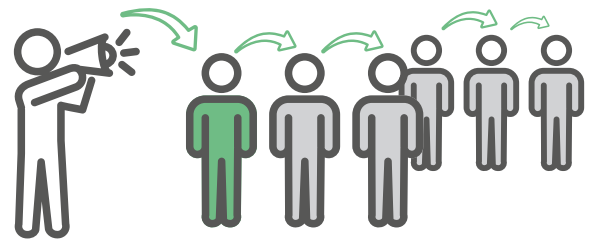
Goodall (2019) also noted the prominence of a 'deficit model' of parenting. In Goodall's words, one of the most pervasive parts of the myth of this model is 'that poor parents (e.g. parenting experiencing poverty) are also poor parents (e.g. parents who do not come up to expected norms of parenting)' (Goodall, 2019: 7).

## Holistic barrier models

Hornby and Lafaele (2011: 39) (updated by Hornby & Blackwell 2018) created a model of the potential barriers for parental involvement in education:



## > Enablers to parental engagement



### Educating and supporting parents/families

Watt (2016) found that encouraging parental involvement and engagement by teaching parents how to teach their children so that they were equipped to do this at home, was a useful strategy.

### Building positive relationships

Flanagan & Hancock's work (2010) noted the importance of individual relationships in service delivery. Some of the literature promotes the idea of regular communication and keeping parents informed of their children's education and progress (Watt 2016)

### Effective initiatives

The literature suggests a number of specific initiatives which have been documented to be successful within their contexts. These include:

- Wilson's (2020) study of hard to reach parents living in communities experiencing poverty explored the use of gatekeepers in the community as an effective tool for engaging hard to reach groups in research.
- McLeish et al.'s (2016) literature review identified three types of volunteering with parents aimed at improving early childhood outcomes: **community champions, volunteers leading groups or volunteer providing one-to-one support**
- Donnelly et al. (2020) found that the role of **parent champions** for activities can be beneficial.
- Fletcher et al. (2013) evaluated a **family support programme**, which involves service user leadership, and is flexibly designed to engage young parents.
- McEwan et al. (2015) demonstrated how a **parental training programme** for preschool attention-deficit/hyper-activity disorder (ADHD) could be adapted to overcome some of the barriers typically experienced by hard to reach

## > Parent and Carer Surveys




### Parent and carer experiences of education

The variation in definitions of 'hard-to-reach' parents in terms of engagement with outreach and young people's decision-making assets was highlighted in the Hello Future parent and carer survey.

 **On average, 44% of parents and carers in Cumbria studied higher level qualifications after school.**

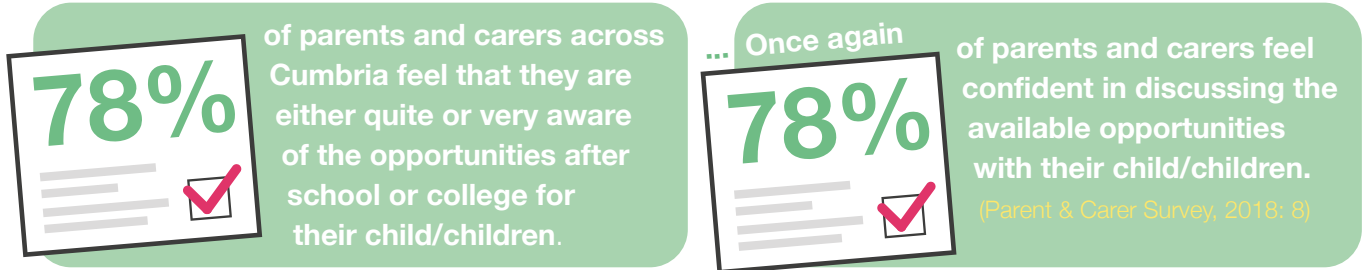
Parents and carers in Barrow-in-Furness (51%) and West Cumbria (50%) are more likely to have done so than parents and carers in Carlisle (25%).  
(Parent & Carer Survey, 2018: 6)

However, it was noted:

 **On average, 68% of students across Cumbria will be the first in the family to either go to college or university.**

(Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 8)

## Parent and carer levels of confidence about supporting their children



However, the survey data indicates that confidence levels can vary depending on the qualification being discussed and the parent or carer's educational background. In particular, the parents and carers appear to be more confident when discussing career options that align with their own experience.

## Parent and carer perceptions of barriers to supporting children through education

Some of the biggest barriers to conversations or further discussions in households include a worry from parents and carers that they do not possess the required knowledge needed to adequately advise their child/children. Parents and carers also have concerns around their child/children lacking confidence and feel this could be improved with additional opportunities for all ages. There is also a desire to improve general parent and carer awareness around careers, pathways and the transition between school, college and careers or apprenticeships and Higher Education. (Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 18)

As with the reviewed literature, themes of self-esteem and confidence are prominent here, linked to perception of what knowledge and information a parent may or may not have.

## Discussions with children about future plans

For the 91% of parents and carers who had discussed future options with their children, the following topics were explored:

### What did you discuss?

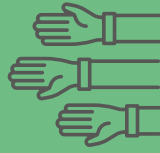


- University or apprenticeship
  - Possible career options
  - Requirements for desired career
  - Which subjects support their career choices
  - Where and how we can find out more
  - Where to visit
- (Parent & Carer Survey, 2020: 13)

## Resources that would enable parents to further support for their children

Both phases of the survey highlighted the need for parents and carers to have access to additional information to enable them to better support their children with making decisions about their education and career pathways. The majority of parents and carers across all qualification groups would particularly value a guide that explains the various education routes available to their children, along with the opportunity to attend college and university open days, and a careers fair attended by employers.

# Interviews with 'hard to reach' parents



## Discussions with children about their future

All of the participants indicated that they had discussed the future with their children, specifically decisions relating to college and sixth form, A-levels, university and employment, along with career and personal aspirations.

Participant 3's child was in year 9 and already had a career in mind, but was concerned about not achieving the necessary GCSE grades due to the impact of COVID-19:



“ Yes we have spoken about what she wants to do in the future. She wants to go to college & I am happy with her decision as she isn't very academic so I feel that to gain a “trade” is the best way for her to go. ”  
(Participant 1)



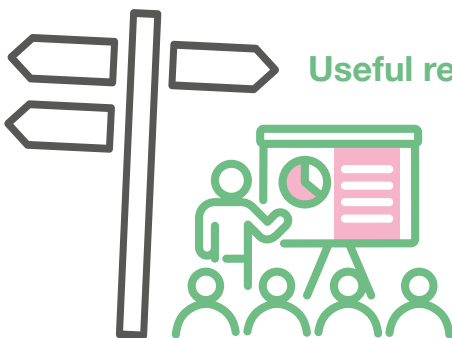
“ I didn't get the grades in my GCSEs so I stayed on at school for an extra year to re-sit them. I then went on to college because I didn't want to do A levels. I have always encouraged the children to stick in at school so they get their qualifications the first time that they try. I have encouraged the children to get a part time job as well as studying. When I was at college I was there 5 days a week, at least 9-4. I also worked 20 hours a week in a factory on an evening after college. ”  
(Participant 1)

## Difficulties experienced by parents when supporting their children

The parents reported several difficulties when supporting their children through education, such as educational terminology, the accessibility of resources, the impact of COVID-19 and the support provided by the child's school.



## Useful resources for supporting decision-making about the future



The parents identified several useful resources for supporting their children with decision-making about the future, including information and support **provided by the school, discussions with the careers officer, open days/evenings and careers fairs**. It was noted that some of the resources and support had recently been delivered virtually due to the impact of Covid-19.

Six parents completed the email interviews. The parents were from Carlisle and Eden (4 participants), and Barrow (2 participants). No participants were recruited from West Cumbria. The participants had children in school years 9, 11 and 13.



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