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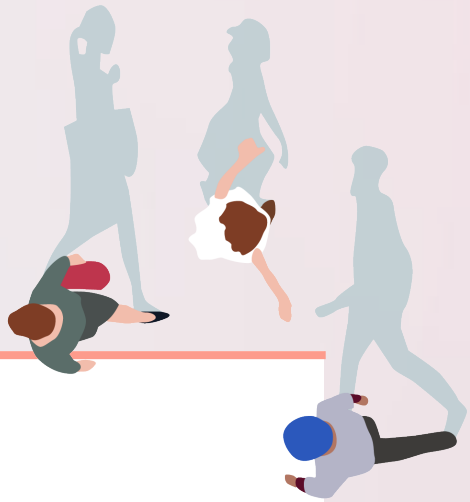

THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF PEER PARENTAL ADVOCACY ON CHILD PROTECTION PRACTICE

A mixed-methods evaluation

January 2023

Acknowledgements

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This research was funded as part of the WWCSC Spark Grant Scheme. The purpose of the scheme is to fund new and innovative research in children's social care, conducted by researchers who may struggle to secure funding through other routes, particularly Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and/or researchers from underrepresented, minoritised groups. This work is an important part of our mission to develop capacity within the research community and generate high-quality evidence in children's social care.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CP	Child protection
CPC	Child protection conference
FGC	Family group conference
IPT	Initial programme theory
OCN	Open College Network
PA	Parental advocacy
PPA	Peer parental advocacy; peer parental advocate

Executive summary

Background

Research evidence suggests that parents find the child protection system to be difficult and at times stigmatising and authoritarian (Diaz, 2020; Gibson, 2015). Parents often perceive child and family social workers as being critical of them and can find child protection conferences (CPCs) in particular to be disempowering and oppressive (Corby, Millar & Young, 1996; Muench, Diaz & Wright, 2017; Gibson, 2015; Diaz, 2020).

Peer parental advocacy (PPA) is a form of peer advocacy whereby parents with lived experience of the child protection system support other parents to navigate and engage with it (Tobis, Bilson & Katugampala, 2020). Proponents of PPA suggest that it has the potential to promote more shared decision-making, improved relationships between social service professionals and families, and enable increased participation by parents (Rockhill, Furrer & Duong, 2015; Bohannan, Gonzalez & Summers, 2016; Damman, 2018; Trescher & Summers, 2020; Berrick, Cohen & Anthony, 2011; Lalayants, 2013, 2017). However, there is limited research regarding PPA in the United Kingdom, not least because there are still relatively few PPA services in the UK and most of those that do exist have only recently been established. Much of the research undertaken on PPA has been in the US, and this has documented the efficacy of peer parental advocates in supporting parents to have a meaningful voice in decision-making. This, in turn, has been shown to reduce the need for children to enter state care (Tobis, 2013; Tobis, Bilson & Katugampala, 2020; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2020).

This report presents the findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of PPA in the London Borough of Camden, aiming to understand the perceived impact of PPA on child protection practice. The use of PPA in Camden was recently highlighted by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022) as an example of innovative practice. Therefore, this evaluation focuses on a programme theory for the key ingredients for a successful PPA service.

Objectives and research questions

This evaluation aims to provide insights into the perceived impact of PPA on child protection practice in Camden local authority by achieving the following objectives:

- Understanding how PPA is perceived to impact decision-making, power relations and relationships between professionals and parents engaged with child protection services
- Developing a programme theory that identifies enabling mechanisms to support future service delivery.

These objectives will be achieved by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the key ingredients of the PPA service in Camden?
2. What are parents' and professionals' experiences of the PPA service?
3. What potential impacts (both positive and negative changes) do parents and professionals who work with PPAs identify?
4. Is it feasible to carry out an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation in the future and, if so, what would the key considerations for designing such a study be?

Design

We worked closely with Camden local authority in order to undertake a mixed-methods evaluation of their Peer Parental Advocacy Service.

Our sample included a range of participants including parents, peer parental advocates, social workers, service managers and child protection (CP) chairs. This is so we could co-produce a programme theory with a range of people with different experiences in order to contribute to our understanding of effective implementation of PPA. In line with the realist approach, we have explored the implementation of PPA in terms of what works for whom and under what circumstances. This has involved an iterative process of theory development based on understanding and making explicit underlying causal mechanisms, the patterns of outcomes associated with them and the ways in which the context influences the relationship between the two. This emphasises contexts, mechanisms and outcomes, rather than outcomes alone (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This theory has enabled us to gain an understanding of some of the critical contextual factors that enable or block desired outcomes, and which key aspects of local settings must be addressed to create a facilitative context for an effective parental advocacy service.

Data collection

Table S1: Data collection summary

Data collection method	Type of participant	Stage of study	Number of participants	Total undertaken
Interviews	Parents	Stage 1 and 2	7	21
	Social workers	Stage 1 and 2	4	
	Senior managers	Stage 1 and 2	3	

	CP chairs	Stage 1	1	
	Peer parent advocates	Stage 1 and 2	6	
Focus groups	Parents and peer parent advocates	Stage 1	12	2
Observations of online meetings	Senior managers, social workers, parents, and peer parent advocates	Stage 1	14	1
Observations of child protection conferences	Social workers, parents, peer parent advocates and CP chairs	Stage 2	Each conference had at least 6 attendees	5
Stakeholder sessions	(Online) CASCADE parents research group – parents with lived experience	Stage 1	18	3
	(In person) CP chairs, senior managers, social workers, parents, peer parent advocates	Stage 2	12	2

Through data collection and analysis, we were able to refine and develop our initial programme theory and create a logic model which highlights the key themes and how these relate to the mechanisms needed for an effective PPA service.

Key findings

- Social services professionals perceived the role of PPA as critical to helping parents understand complex processes and terminology before and during meetings.

- PPAs may have a role in reducing the imbalance of power between parents and professionals, and between parents and social workers in particular. Parental advocates are able to facilitate effective communication and engagement between parents and social workers, helping parents become more empowered to have a voice and play a meaningful role in decision-making.

- Parents without an advocate can feel judged, disempowered and confused, leading in turn to feelings of anger, upset and confusion. PPAs can support parents in providing essential emotional and social support during this very stressful time.

- The role of PPAs can help “bridge the gap” between parents and professionals, thus generating trust between the parties.

- COVID-19 has considerably impacted parental advocacy in Camden. This was due to a reduction of parental advocacy activity, with online meetings further inhibiting parental engagement, sometimes owing to a lack of digital resources or knowledge (for example, suitable devices or stable connection).

- There is an ongoing debate around the extent to which PPA should be professionalised. While some participants suggested that peer advocates lacked the specialist knowledge to deal with certain aspects of advocacy (such as mental health or domestic violence), others noted that they were better positioned to bond emotionally with parents and help redress the balance between parents and professionals in a more meaningful way.

- Our study supports previous research which highlights that ongoing supervision is a crucial requirement for PPA. Some professional participants identified a particular concern over the risk of advocates overstepping boundaries, emphasising the importance of effective recruitment, training, supervision and support for parental advocates.

Discussion and implications

Our evaluation builds on early evidence that suggests that parental advocacy can assist parents and social workers to build more positive working relationships. Many parents feel disempowered and confused by the child protection system and expectations set by social workers. Parents and advocates in this study particularly emphasised the oppressive environment of the child protection system and associated fear of losing children. The crucial role of advocates in supporting communication between parents is fundamental to rebalancing power relations and helping parents to feel confident in expressing their thoughts and feelings throughout the child protection process.

Although this evaluation demonstrates an example of where the implementation of a PPA programme has been successful, it has also identified challenges to implementation and how these can be overcome. One key concern related to the extent to which PPAs are or should be professionalised and how they could effectively balance their professional and personal experiences. In Camden, this balance is met by advocates completing an Open

College Network (OCN) qualification. Another identified barrier to implementation was the risk of practitioners feeling threatened by the inclusion of PPAs. However, this evaluation revealed a positive understanding of the role of peer advocates by professionals, with clear acknowledgement of the value of their role. While this may reflect the positive context and perceptions of advocacy in Camden in particular, it also demonstrates the potential of well-implemented advocacy programmes. We hope that the positive response from the Camden programme provides an underpinning from which further PPA programmes can be explored further afield.

Implications for practice

- The evaluation highlights the perceived positive impact of PPAs in improving relations between parents and professionals and subsequent improvement in parental engagement in child protection social work. Therefore, this suggests a need for further investment in PPA services nationally as per the recommendations in the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022)

- The evaluation finds a clear preference for peer advocates over professional advocates due to the value of their lived experience which uniquely enables them to empathise with and provide tailored support for parents. Rather than being simply "another professional" in the room, PPAs can use their lived experience to support parents in a more meaningful way

- The evaluation demonstrates the need for effective and personalised supervision, training and support for PPAs which takes into account the strengths of their lived experience. PPAs who feel adequately supported are more likely to engage in the advocacy role in a meaningful and consistent way

- PPA shows considerable promise. Based on this evaluation, we have identified various benefits; however, PPA needs to be further evaluated more extensively, as we don't yet know how it performs compared to other interventions or compared to no intervention. Based on the evidence gained from this evaluation, this suggests a need to move towards PPA and local authorities should be encouraged to consider implementing and evaluating PPA locally.

Conclusions

Through this evaluation, we have highlighted thoughts around understanding the perceived impact of PPA on child protection practice and insight into the key ingredients needed for a successful PPA service. The data gained from this evaluation have started to address the gap in research on the effectiveness of PPA services in the UK by identifying emerging themes and potential mechanisms which contribute to making PPA services operate efficiently. Key themes considered from our research include the complexity of the child protection system and the positive role of parental advocates in rebalancing power relations between social workers and parents whose children are involved with children's social care. Other themes include the role of PPAs in building trust between parents and social services,

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PPA, and potential challenges which may inhibit an effective PPA service. By accounting for the nuances of each theme and the contextual factors that affect them, we have identified mechanisms that underpin successful implementation of parental advocacy initiatives and the circumstances that enable these to work effectively.

In summary, our findings from this evaluation highlight the value of the role of PPAs in relation to supporting parents during child protection processes. This evaluation contributes to a growing research evidence base on PPA and parent advocacy in the UK and provides a foundation from which other advocate services can be investigated in the UK.

1. Introduction

This report presents our findings and final programme theory developed from a mixed-methods evaluation of peer parental advocacy (PPA) in one local authority, the London Borough of Camden. PPA is becoming increasingly prominent as a potential solution to issues relating to parental engagement with child services, challenges within relationships between parents and social workers, and feelings of oppression and shame that parents involved with the child protection system often face. Recently, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England found "transformational examples" of parental advocacy (PA) in the UK that also help to keep children living safely with their families (MacAlister, 2022: p.86). Finding that for many parents, independent representation and advocacy was a valuable part of navigating the child protection process (MacAlister, 2022), the review recommended that all families involved with child protection services should be offered PA services.

PPA aims to support parents who are engaged with the child protection process, through advice and advocacy, helping them to play a meaningful role in decision-making about their children. The experiences of parents and the nature and extent of support they require has become an increasingly prominent policy issue. In response to this, PPA has been described as a "new and significant evidence-based strategy for supporting families" (Berrick, Cohen & Anthony, 2011: p.22). Proponents argue that PPA has the potential to create a "shift" that challenges the "centrality of professionally driven case planning" (Sears et al., 2017: p.80), enabling more shared decision-making, better relationships between professionals and families, and a more humane and participatory system (Rockhill, Furrer & Duong, 2015; Bohannan, Gonzalez & Summers, 2016; Damman, 2018; Trescher & Summers, 2020; Berrick, Cohen & Anthony, 2011; Lalayants, 2013, 2017).

Tobis, Bilson and Katugampala (2020: p.20) describe peer parental advocacy as

> *"a form of peer advocacy where parents who themselves have had experience of the child welfare system help other parents involved to navigate it. In addition, they also help to develop strategies to change the system."*

Early evidence suggests that parental advocacy can assist parents and social workers to build more positive working relationships, with advocates able to act as a "bridge" between parents and social workers (Diaz et al., forthcoming). Engagement of, and partnership with parents has long been recognised as a crucial component of social work, enshrined in law in the Children Act 1989 and in policy (see DfE, 2018), and identified as an effective way of helping children and their families (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015; Sankaran, 2015). Cohen and Canan (2006) highlight that engagement is an important element of any childcare social work service provision, without which the service could not fulfil the key task of helping families to function better. Positively, among social workers, there is consensus that parental engagement and partnership working is valuable (Corby, Millar & Young, 1996; Darlington, Healy & Feeney, 2010).

Tobis, Bilson and Katugampala (2020) identify three types of peer parental advocacy:

1. **Case advocacy** involves a peer parental advocate offering support, guidance and information to help a parent currently involved with child protection services to participate and navigate the system. Activities of the PPA in a case advocacy role include regular telephone contact, attendance at meetings (helping before, during and after), providing information about rights or services, providing support to access groups, and ensuring their views and wishes are heard and respected.

2. **Programme advocacy** involves trained PPAs being involved in designing, shaping and delivering programmes designed to help parents care for their children or make changes to enable their children to be reunified to their care.

3. **Policy advocacy** involves acting politically to instigate change, participating on government boards, attending conferences, teaching in social work courses and "working at the grassroots and community levels to organize and advocate for change" (2021: p.20).

Much of the research to date has centred on case and programme advocacy.

When we consider the aims and intended outcomes of PPA, Berrick, Cohen and Anthony (2011) make a useful distinction between proximal and distal goals which are useful in considering the outcomes from this evaluation. Proximal goals are to help parents understand how to effectively engage in children's services, increase motivation to access support and understand the implications of their action or inaction. Proximal goals also refer to benefits to advocates and improved relations between social workers and parents. Distal goals are more broadly focused on reducing maltreatment, reducing the need for children to be placed into alternative care where this can be safely achieved, and improving the likelihood of reunification when children have been removed.

In this evaluation, we specifically focus on case advocacy whereby parent advocates offer support and advice before, during and after child protection conferences. We aim to understand how PPA works in Camden, and how the PPA service is perceived to affect decision-making and relationships between social workers and families. We also consider a range of additional factors, including the recruitment, training and oversight of PPAs and the support available for parental advocates. This evaluation supports the development of PPA in Camden, as well as informing other local authorities who are developing or considering PPA. By utilising a mixed-method, realist evaluation, we adopt an iterative process of theory development based on understanding causal mechanisms and associated patterns of outcomes. In line with principles of realist evaluation, we are not attempting to answer the question "does this intervention work?" but in relation to this intervention "what works, for whom and in which circumstances?"

1.1 Research questions and objectives

The objectives of this evaluation are:

1. To understand how parental advocates are perceived by parents and professionals to impact decision-making, power relations and relationships between both parents

and professionals involved with child protection services – identifying potential impacts (positive and negative) of advocacy on parents and outcomes for children and families.

2. To develop a programme theory that identifies enabling mechanisms that could be used to support future service delivery and explore the feasibility of a future experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation into parental advocacy.

These objectives will be achieved by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the key ingredients of the PPA service in Camden?

2. What are parents' and professionals' experiences of the PPA service?

3. What potential impacts (both positive and negative changes) do parents and professionals who work with PPAs identify?

4. Is it feasible to carry out an experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation in the future and, if so, what would the key considerations for designing such a study be?

1.2 Background to the advocacy programme

The evaluation has been under way since 1 September 2021, with the programme itself initially launched in April 2019, although referrals began on a pilot basis from January 2019. In Camden, parental advocacy (PA) takes different forms. Family group conference (FGC) coordinators primarily support and coordinate FGCs with parents and families; however, some FGC coordinators are also working as parental advocates and have supported more than 70 parents at child protection conferences (CPCs). FGC coordinators are also involved in the training and development of peer parental advocates (PPAs). This involves supporting parents who have lived experience of the child protection process to become PPAs for other parents. Parents who are training to become PPA's have previous lived experience but are no longer open to social services; some of these parents may have undergone child protection investigations and child protection conferences. The approach taken by Camden Children's Services in cultivating relationships with advocates means that awareness of lived experience is more normalised, although this is not a requirement for a parent to become a peer advocate. The parents receive training by undertaking an OCN-accredited qualification which includes training sessions, written and reflective work. As these parents are also being supported by FGC coordinators who have experience in advocating for parents in this context, they also receive ongoing support and training from this relationship. Since January 2022, training has been under way for additional parental advocates with 17 peer advocates in total now involved with supporting parents in Camden. Of these 17 advocates, 12 also work in the role of FGC coordinator, though all have direct lived experience of the child protection process. Since then, peer parental advocates have worked with 25 parents in total, some with continuing support from 2021, with 15 new referrals this year. This data provides fresh insights into the role of PPAs and the context of successful implementation in Camden.

2. Methods

2.1 Design

We undertook a mixed-methods, realist evaluation, adopting an iterative process of theory development based on understanding causal mechanisms and associated patterns of outcomes. This emphasises contexts, mechanisms and outcomes rather than outcomes alone (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This is particularly important for a project focused on the implementation of a new intervention across one local authority site with specific historical, geographic and demographic context.

This study consisted of six stages in two phases leading to the development of our final programme theory which seeks to articulate our understanding of effective implementation of parental advocacy in Camden:

Stage 1 (September 2021–January 2022): Building initial programme theory (IPT)

Step 1: Identification of issues and context via a narrative review.

Step 2: Initial interviews, focus groups and observations to test assumptions and understandings.

Step 3: Development of initial logic model consolidating initial theory of effective PPA in Camden.

Stage 2 (January 2022–May 2022): Testing and developing refined final programme theory

Step 4: Additional individual interviews and focus groups to test IPT.

Step 5: Key stakeholder meetings to present programme theory and obtain feedback.

Step 6: Revisions to final programme theory based on feedback from stakeholders and interviews.

2.1.1 Research site

We carried out fieldwork in Camden, which was selected as it was one of the first local authorities to set up a PPA service in England. Camden is an inner-London borough in the north of the city with mixed levels of deprivation and a diverse population. Statistics suggest that 31% of children living in Camden reside in low-income families (Ofsted, 2017). Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 50% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in England as a whole (Ofsted, 2017).

In 2019, a peer parental advocacy programme was set up in Camden. The London Family Group Conference learning partnership has developed an Open College Network (OCN) accredited qualification in parent advocacy which includes a range of formal training

sessions, essays and reflective work. Parents from different local authorities in London, including Camden, have completed the qualification in a first cohort of advocates, demonstrating the value of lived-experience peer support within the child protection system. The PPAs are supported by FGC coordinators, who have experience of carrying out parent advocacy in child protection work and some also have lived experience of the system. There are currently 12 FGC coordinators and 17 peer parental advocates supporting parents in Camden (with some overlap between the two roles). All parents engaged in CPCs are informed of the option to receive support from a peer advocate via a leaflet. Peer advocates have worked with 25 parents since January 2022 with 15 new referrals, with a total of 60 parents supported since the advocacy offer began.

2.1.2 Sample recruitment

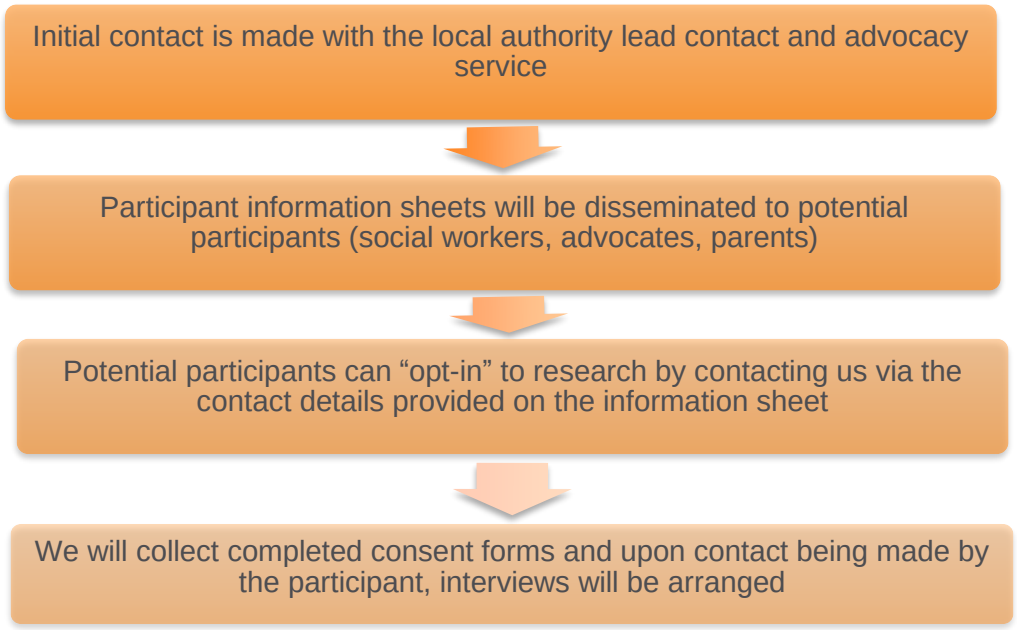
We selected participants via purposive sampling techniques which allowed for the inclusion of individuals best placed to gather rich data in order to address the objectives of this study (Patton, 1990). This approach is particularly efficient for small-scale studies, such as this evaluation, as it enables participants to be chosen for their experiences and expertise (Denscombe, 2017).

The local authority and the peer advocacy service acted as a gateway to the recruitment of participants. Figure 2.1 outlines the recruitment process. We provided the local authority and advocacy service with participant eligibility criterion:

- Parents who have been supported by parental advocates
- Peer parental advocates and family group conference coordinators who have supported parents in child protection meetings
- Senior managers involved in parental advocacy/peer parental advocacy
- Social workers who have experience of working with peer parental advocates.

Our sampling of participants was purposive and was led by the developing programme theory. Individuals were selected on the basis of their potential to shed light on areas of key interest as well as gaps in understanding in relation to how peer parental advocacy works with parents. To ensure that we could recruit a suitably sized sample, we asked the peer parental advocates to talk to the parents about the study.

Figure 2.1: Recruitment process



2.1.3 Data collection

We chose a qualitative methodology to best support the developing programme theory. In order to answer the research questions most effectively, we used different methods of data collection in order to develop our ideas around the initial programme theory (IPT) and how PPA might work.

The following data collection methods were used to obtain data from parents, professionals including social workers and senior managers, and peer parental advocates:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus groups
- Observations of child protection conferences
- In-person stakeholder workshops.

The stakeholder workshops in particular, provided an opportunity to test our final programme theory and logic model with parents, advocates and professionals.

2.1.4 Data analysis

We transcribed interviews and focus groups verbatim and then carried out thematic analysis using NVivo12 software. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage approach to analysing data was adopted to enable an inductive approach to thematic analysis. This consisted of becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The transcripts were coded

paragraph by paragraph, identifying the most recurrent themes within the narratives. We tried to use the same codes if they returned within the same interview or between interviews.

2.2 Developing the programme theory

The IPT is designed to outline the theory of change underpinning the intervention. It does this by making explicit the links between the causal mechanisms that are thought to generate the effects of PPA and the particular contexts in which these mechanisms may or may not "fire".

The concept of a "mechanism" in realist theory and evaluation is used as a way of capturing and describing how outcomes are generated through the interactions between the intervention components, the context in which they are delivered and the way they influence and are influenced by often unseen but powerful elements driving human interaction and change. For example, how someone receiving a component of an intervention feels (ashamed, accepted, optimistic) is likely to influence how they interact with the intervention and therefore any outcome. Equally, how the intervention is delivered is likely to affect how it is received. Context is also considered a key element to the ability of the mechanism to generate an outcome, and realist evaluation is concerned with considering how these "Context–Mechanism–Outcome", or "CMO", configurations interplay. In developing our IPT, we attempted to explore how PPA might lead to change, and have identified three potential generative mechanisms, developed from our initial programme theory model.

In order to develop the programme theory, we divided our project into two phases: building the IPT; and refining, testing and developing the final programme theory. These are discussed further in sections 2.2.1, 2.2.2 and 2.2.3.

2.2.1 Stage 1: Building initial programme theory

The first stage of our research developed an initial programme theory (IPT). First, we considered key research relating to PPA services via a narrative review of key literature (Devine et al., forthcoming). We then gathered data from a range of sources to explore our initial ideas about how PPA might work in Camden.

Step 1: Narrative review

A narrative review was chosen as our method for generating an initial understanding of the context within which PPA programmes are implemented in the UK, to obtain a broad, comprehensive perspective. Narrative reviews benefit from less strict conditions for inclusion criteria or method for appraisal than other types of review (MacDonald, 2003) and consequently have greater scope in tackling wider-ranging topics than a systematic review (Collins & Fauser, 2004).

The narrative review aimed to address the following research question:

> *What is the evidence on the effectiveness of parental advocacy, especially in relation to parental engagement when child and family social workers are working with families?*

The search was conducted between October and December 2021, and included a range of national and international databases. The search strategy involved multiple keyword searches using the terms “child protection”, “parental engagement”, “participation”, and “parent peer support”, “peer mentor”, “parent partner”, “peer advocates”, “parent advocate” and “representatives”. In addition, a snowballing technique was implemented to identify additional relevant papers not identified in the initial search. Review searches were limited by language (English) and those published between 2005 and 2021. No restrictions were imposed on research design, and studies were included in this review where they were about parental engagement or peer parental advocacy. Studies were excluded if they were published before 2005 or not in the English language.

The themes explored in the narrative review were used to identify initial interview questions and inform a broad understanding of current themes and concerns in the implementation of PPA programmes in the UK.

Step 2: Initial data collection

The next stage consisted of testing our initial understanding and assumptions of effective PPA. To this end, we gathered data from:

- Thirteen interviews: three social workers, three senior managers, three parents, three trainee PPAs and one CP chair
- One focus group with eight people: two parents; three parental advocates and three managers
- Observing an online meeting on parental advocacy attended by: peer parental advocates, parents, senior managers and social workers at Camden.

We used purposive sampling to capture the perspectives of participants relevant to this study. This approach allows for the inclusion of individuals who will be best placed to gather rich data from, in order to respond and answer the proposed research questions (Patton, 1990). This is efficient in relation to small-scale studies, such as this evaluation, as people will be chosen for their experience and expertise (Denscombe, 2017).

Following our data collection from the initial interviews, we carried out thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. We then used inductive coding to identify key themes to inform the development of the programme theory and logic model. The initial programme logic model can be seen in Figure 2.2 below.

This model was then used to develop a series of initial if–then statements, otherwise understood as statements of causality describing how actions can potentially produce a particular outcome (Brand et al., 2019). In this case, these statements aimed to capture actions that would lead to effective PPA implementation in Camden. In total, six initial if–then statements were proposed exploring the link between intervention, mechanism and outcomes for parents.

1. If the PPA provides accurate information to a parent on the complex procedures, processes and language within child protection services, then parents are more likely to have a better understanding of these processes.

2. If parents feel, through the support of their PPA, that they have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the process and language, then they are more likely to feel empowered to communicate effectively with professionals during visits and in key child welfare meetings.

3. If PPAs support parents to communicate more effectively with social workers and professionals, then they are likely to engage in a positive way with the process and be more honest with professionals, leading to improved outcomes for children and families.

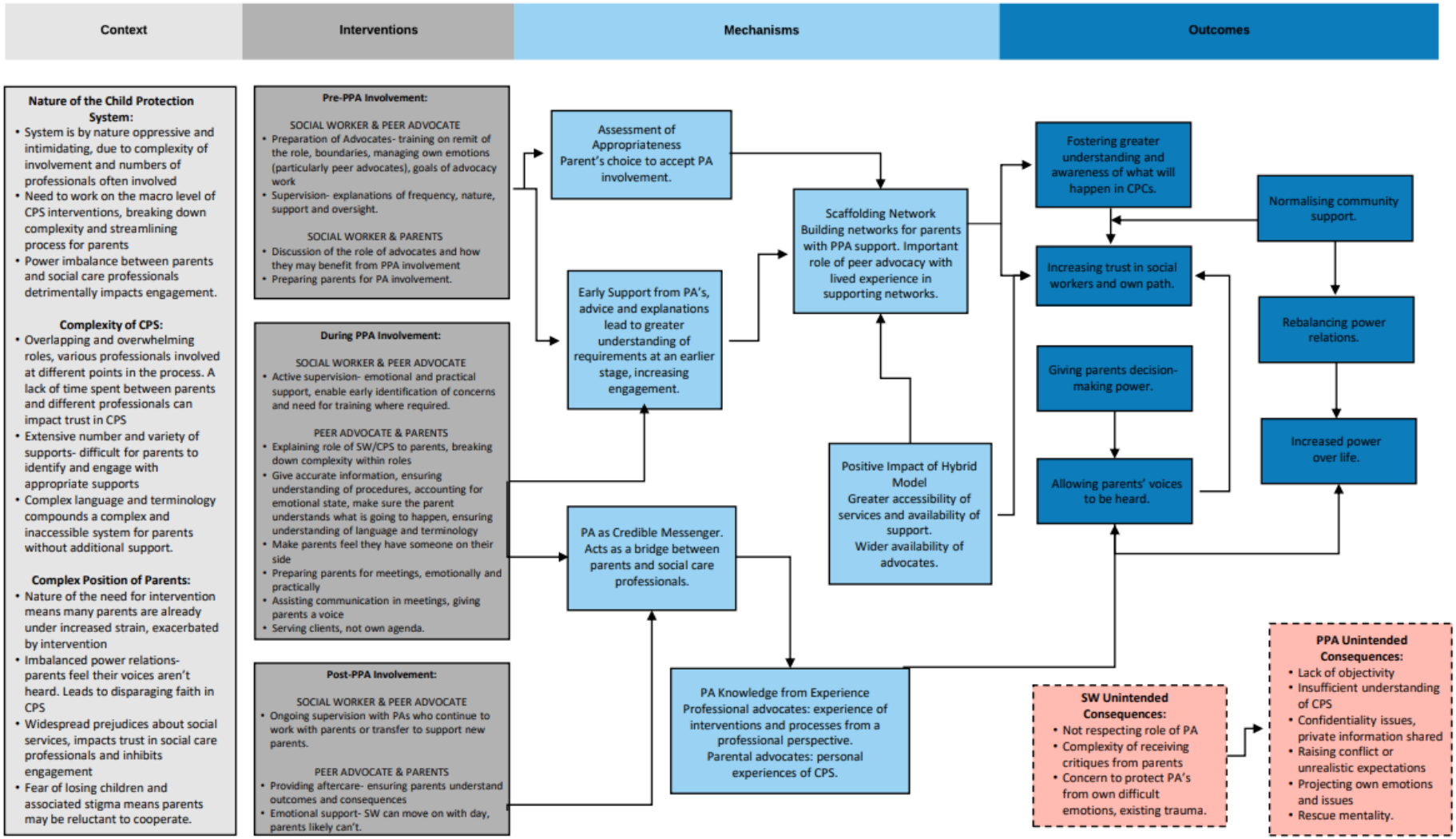
4. If a parent has a positive relationship with professionals, then they will feel more supported to provide insights and be more open and honest about their needs and any concerns they have for their children.

5. If a parent is supported by a PPA with similar shared experiences and social class and/or ethnic background, then they are more likely to feel understood and emotionally supported throughout the process.

6. If PPAs positively engage with parents in demystifying and explaining the role of child protection services, then this will begin to address widespread fears, prejudices and stigma surrounding social services and thus increase trust in social workers. This will lead to improved relationships between parents and social workers and will mean parents are more likely to be honest about the issues they are struggling with.

These statements were explored and refined as part of the final programme theory.

Figure 2.2: IPT initial logic model



2.2.2 Stage 2: Testing, refining and developing the programme theory

Stage 2 involved testing and refining the programme theory. Following the first stage, which had started to collect initial data, develop themes and build our programme theory, this stage focused on undertaking further data collection and analysis to inform our theory. We carried out:

- Further eight interviews (21 interviews in total): four parents, three advocates and one social worker
- Observations of five CPCs, all of which had a peer parental advocate take part in the meeting
- A focus group with professionals and parents
- Two in-person stakeholder meetings in Camden, which were particularly helpful in testing our final programme theory and logic model. Stakeholder sessions had 12 participants: two child protection chairs, three senior managers, one social worker, three parents and three parental advocates.

From this point, we began to finalise our programme theory, with the additional data supporting, refuting and unpacking the theory with greater clarity.

2.2.3 Logic model

The logic model utilised as part of the programme theory underwent several iterative stages of development, with data from interviews, observations, focus groups and stakeholder meetings providing valuable feedback and clarity on our understanding of effective PPA implementation in Camden. The final logic model (see Figure 3.4) breaks down the advocacy programme into four key areas: context, intervention, mechanisms and outcomes. These components are discussed in depth in Chapter 3 of this report (Findings). From this finalised programme theory, we were able to refine and evaluate our if–then statements which aim to provide actionable statements exploring the implementation of effective PPA in Camden.

3. Findings

In this chapter we present our key findings from interviews, observations, focus groups and stakeholder meetings conducted during stage one (building the IPT) and stage two (testing and refining the IPT) of this study. The first section sets out key themes arising from our research. The development from the initial programme theory to the final programme theory is then presented through the use of diagrams and a logic model to demonstrate how peer parental advocacy works, how it has been implemented in Camden, and the context in which it appears to be successful. Finally, we explore key enablers and barriers to successful implementation of peer parental advocacy.

3.1 Thematic analysis

Using extracts from qualitative interviews, our analysis first considers the role of PPAs in facilitating parental engagement, exploring the complexity of the child protection system in terms of navigation and terminology barriers, issues of balancing power relations in communication, and managing emotional responses to difficult proceedings. Second, we explore and analyse perceptions of trust between parents and social workers. We then consider the impact of COVID-19 on parental advocacy and the need for ongoing effective support and training processes for PPAs, before addressing discourse surrounding the distinction between peer and professional forms of advocacy.

3.1.1 Parental advocacy and enabling parental engagement

3.1.1.1 Complexity of the system

Parental engagement with social care practitioners has long been recognised as a crucial component of social work practice, an understanding enshrined in law and policy (Horwitz & Marshall, 2015; Sankaran, 2015). However, the complexity of child protection processes combined with "information overload" can make navigating this system difficult for parties.

> **Social Worker 2:** *"… it's a bit like being in a spider's web sometimes … Are we overloading the family with like lots of different people who have like a kind of similar remit? … but the number of supports do, in themselves, add complexity.***"**

Parents emphasised the importance of the PPA in assisting them in navigating these complex processes, terminologies and supports.

> **Parent 2:** *"The advocate that I have … has been brilliant. It's just basically someone that understands the system and understands the whole process, court and social services element itself."*

Featherstone et al. (2011) suggest that the complexity of these processes, combined with social workers struggling to explain child protection processes to parents in a meaningful and accessible way, can be a key barrier to parental engagement with child protection

services. Unsurprisingly, this can leave parents feeling stressed, marginalised and oppressed as a result of these processes (Corby, Millar & Young, 1996; Cossar, Brandon & Jordan, 2011; Appleton, 2016; Gibson, 2015; Muench, Diaz & Wright, 2017; Diaz, 2020). Similarly, the complexities of specialist language and terminology can present a further barrier to meaningful parental engagement with social workers, leaving parents feeling overwhelmed and unable to identify appropriate supports. The interviews noted that PPAs can provide parents with an understanding in simple accessible language both before and during meetings.

> **Social Worker 1:** *"I think a very well-trained advocate with lived experience of child protection processes themselves can be very, very helpful in those contexts … So, if somebody's experienced that and understands what that must be like, I think that can be really helpful. I think that that parent could feel very held, emotionally held, by that."*

Social workers also observed that issues relating to the complexities of language and processes were sometimes extended to professionals, who themselves may have a broad rather than specialist knowledge in certain areas. One social worker particularly noted the need for specialist knowledge when dealing with legal frameworks.

> **Social Worker 1***: "… you know, they're looking for responses made to answer the aims of the assessment and made to create an evidence base for providing support within the framework of the Care Act. So, I think you do need somebody that's very well versed in the Care Act."*

If social workers report difficulties in understanding and explaining terminology, the complex language and structure of child protection processes are likely to be even more overwhelming for parents with little to no experience of the system. This creates a clear imbalance of power between parents and social care practitioners which can inhibit meaningful parental engagement in the process and may lead to parents feeling further oppressed by the system.

3.1.1.2 Rebalancing power relations for effective communication

A key theme raised by several participants was the power imbalance between parents and social care professionals. This can have a negative impact on parents' engagement with child protection services. Parental advocates' ability to facilitate effective communication and engagement between parents and social workers is predicated, in part, on the idea that when parents have better relationships with social workers and feel their voices are heard, they become more empowered to play a meaningful role in decision-making. This was described as the "gold standard" (FGC Coordinator) in PPA, and is important because the child protection process can be particularly difficult and disempowering for many parents who are unfamiliar with the system (Thorpe, 2007).

> **Peer Parent Advocate 1:** *"It's very like daunting, I think. Because you fear all these were all police and social workers, all these people have power over you. So … you might feel … you're so small."*

For many parents navigating child protection services, the feeling of being overwhelmed, powerless and alone can compound feelings of shame caused by the nature of child protection involvement (Gibson, 2015; Chambers et al., 2019).

> **Service Manager 2:** *"… in terms of sort of equalising power, which, you know, is a big part of advocacy, then someone who really has been there and done it, you know, is perhaps able to do that to the greatest extent. … And [as a parent] knowing that the person you're talking to is also someone … who's kind of experienced that, it must … must feel quite reassuring … and yourself perceive the power to be more equal."*

Crucially, the interviews emphasise the perception of peer advocates as having a unique position to provide knowledge and support to navigate child protection processes while also building trust and bridges between parents and professionals.

> **Parent 2:** *"… you can talk to them with ease, because you know they're not an actual social worker, so you can be as open … you know that they are like independent."*

> **Parent 6:** *"I think for me there's something very powerful about lived experience and knowing that someone has been there and for a parent, say, going into a child protection conference to be supported by someone else who has in the past themselves been through a child protection conference brings a very unique sort of support and equalisation of power."*

> **Peer Parent Advocate 1:** *"… so there's nothing to be scared or fear of, just that I hope it … my role can empower them to speak up of themself."*

This aligns with Featherstone et al. (2011) who found that parents noted improvements in communication when supported by parent advocates. Moreover, building confidence in parents is key to ensuring that their voices are heard among professionals.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 6:** *"So I just feel when our work with them before the conference is incredibly important, even during the conference it is but it's before the conference when the work is done about understanding, making them to feel confident, and actually just having their voice heard first."*

> **Parent 2:** *"… it's been the first time I've been able to communicate with social services in a way where my voice is being heard because I can say whatever I want to my advocate in … with as many f-words or whatever else I want to put it and they can go okay, let me write this in a way that I can then communicate that to social services and get your point across."*

Participants suggested that in addition to facilitating communication and empowering parents, PPAs should also speak up for parents where necessary. Where there are clear additional needs, advocates can help professionals to identify them. As a result, advocates also function as "cultural brokers" (Marcenko et al., 2010) on behalf of parents.

> **FGC Coordinator 1:** *"And also, in terms of understanding when you're working with people from a different nationality or culture, etc., you know that also does open up professionals' you know sort of understanding in terms of ... where they're coming from, where are the parents coming from, what is their understanding in terms of their cultural norms."*

Overall, responses showed that professionals were positive about rebalancing power and increasing participation in shared decision-making with parents.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"… any sort of equalisation of power is positive … a good social worker, I would say, would welcome that … and anything that can draw out points of view as fully in comprehensively as possible would be a good thing."*

> **CP Chair 1:** *"I think it's important for parents to feel they're heard if there … there's definitely a power imbalance … no matter how much we try. We have to acknowledge that there is a power imbalance."*

However, it was also noted that rebalancing power created additional challenges for social workers whose role "naturally has more power" (Service Manager). This was an area of concern given the already high workloads of social work practitioners, something which Darlington, Healy & Feeney (2010) identified as a system-related barrier impeding effective participation with parent advocates. One service manager drew on this, noting that while they encourage parents to participate meaningfully in decision-making, this inadvertently adds to existing workloads.

> **Service Manager 1:** *"We want our parents to hold as much power as they can within the process, but when you do that, it gives us a huge challenge as the authority, because somebody who was disempowered is suddenly much more powerful … the processes that we go through only add to … the workload rather than reduce the workload … it's positive and it's a necessary part of our work … but it's complicated."*

Maintaining a balance between building meaningful relationships with parents and ensuring children's welfare is a key challenge, particularly when social workers have heavy caseloads. The role of the social worker is also widely regarded as emotionally taxing, with high risks of vicarious trauma and burnout (Diaz, 2020; Carpenter, Webb & Bostock., 2013). This raises concerns that increased workloads will have a negative impact on social worker referrals to advocacy services. In many ways, the success of parental advocacy is heavily reliant on professionals' willingness to share power, yet structural barriers such as heavy workloads and bureaucracy may inhibit this in practice.

3.1.1.3 Emotional responses

The emotional context in which many parents find themselves during CPCs – feeling judged, disempowered and confused (Bekaert et al., 2021) – was also given consideration in the present study.

> **Parent 2:** *"I guess, obviously, I was nervous, because I had never had any involvement with social services, and all of a sudden there is this involvement and this big meeting was coming up … the first thing any parent thinks is, oh my God, I could lose my children, you know?"*

Parents feeling overwhelmed was an issue that arose multiple times, impacting their ability to communicate effectively.

> **Social Worker 2:** *"So she needed an advocate, because she was exhausted, to come and, you know, kind of just get her thoughts in order, get what she wanted to communicate ready for this assessment … to stop her from getting overwhelmed."*

> **Social Worker 1:** *"So instead of having to just conjure up all the information and how it impacted her on the fly, they could see it first, talk through it and then think about how they would respond to each of those questions … you know, actual experiences could be conveyed more accurately, more robustly and it wasn't overwhelming with her."*

Indeed, the role of the PPA is crucial to communicating information in a way that reduces the risk of parents becoming overwhelmed in a system that is complex and not always user-friendly.

> **FGC Coordinator 1:** *"I think everyone becomes slightly vulnerable because they have a lot of these meetings and emotionally, they do need a lot of support … So, a few of the times I always say to the parent, 'Look, if you do forget something, if you do get a bit emotional let me know if you want me to jog your memory.'"*

This demonstrates how difficult communication and emotional regulation can be, something Brown (2006) suggests is a skill that parents must develop to help them successfully navigate the child protection system. For many parents this is understandably very difficult, and PPAs are uniquely placed to help parents not only improve their knowledge of available supports and break down language barriers but also provide essential emotional and social support.

3.1.2 Building trust between social workers and parents

Another recurring theme was the role of the PPA in "bridging the gap" between parents and professionals, thereby fostering trust between the parties. Previous research has revealed a distinct lack of trust in child protection services and social workers (Featherstone et al., 2018; Gibson, 2015; Diaz, 2020). Participants discussed the societal stigma of social work, particularly the damage to trust when children are removed from their families, as well as the potential role of the advocate in building relationships between the parties.

> **Parent 5:** *"I have outright always told social services that from losing my first child I now find it very difficult whenever they come and knock on my door again, or I become very sort of like hostile."*

> **Service Manager 1:** *"… we have to make the most difficult decisions, and we try to do that in the most open and accountable way, but, you know, I … just if somebody is not trusting you … it can only be a good thing to bring somebody else on board who has more experience of this process, and who can help hopefully build that relationship between the two sides."*

As a result, PPAs play an important role in shifting perceptions of child protection from a paternalistic to a collaborative system (Bekaert et al., 2021). Some parents commented positively on how having an advocate had changed their perceptions of the role of social workers:

> **Parent 1:** *"It has changed. Because I know that they're just there to do their job and to like safeguard the children and that."*

> **Parent 2:** *"… they're not there just to take your children away… You know, basically, that's not their ultimate aim … their aim is to [help] children to be safe, but they'll work with you to make sure that you can give a safe environment to the children. It's not just like, oh you know, we're going to just take them away and that's it."*

However, building trust between parents and social workers necessitates co-operation from all parties, a theme related to rebalancing power relations. Both parent advocates and professionals highlighted the importance of parties working together to achieve positive outcomes as well as the advocates' role in facilitating open and clear communication.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 6:** *"But also, we have to be more inspirational, you know, because as we've been through this storm, we've been through this and you can encourage them, give them more power to build their resistance to maybe change their attitude into not defensive but cooperative"*

> **Service Manager 1:** *"… I think those parents who are sceptical, who are hostile, or untrusting, I think that's the biggest area where I think this could be used."*

This aligns with research which finds that improving communication between parties builds trust by encouraging parents to be more open and honest with professionals (Lalayants et al., 2017). In a circular fashion, advocates suggest that increased trust can result in improved parental engagement, building a positive relationship between all parties. The presence of an advocate in CPCs was also perceived to ensure accountability on the part of social workers and other professionals as well as make the process as transparent and fair as possible.

> **Social Worker 2:** *"It was about showing them … that could be challenged. That needs to be challenged. You know? ... especially in meetings and that social workers … have to be accountable with what they have written … and they have to explain the reason why they did what they did as well."*

Importantly, advocacy was seen to be key to empowering parents to challenge their position and take control and responsibility over their own choices.

> **Parent 3**: *"Definitely, everyone is taking responsibility … 100 per cent they've changed everything and how they work as social services."*

3.1.3 The impact of COVID-19 on parental advocacy

Our data highlighted that COVID-19 has had a considerable impact on parental advocacy in Camden. One of the key negative impacts of the pandemic identified was the reduction in parent advocacy activity at this time.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"… there hasn't been as much activity in … in that sphere as I would have liked over the last couple of years."*

This is consistent with previous research suggesting that the pandemic has changed the way social workers interact with families (Baginsky, Ixer & Manthorpe, 2020; Ferguson et al., 2020). Although data collected at this stage does not fully explore why there was a considerable reduction in advocacy activity as this time, it is possible that the pandemic impacted the availability and training opportunities for parent advocates. In our study, professionals highlighted changes in procedures following the transition to online services at the height of the pandemic. One service manager noted that while this was unexpected, it did represent a shift in dynamic resulting in parents often arriving in a "lion's den" where they could not be introduced to professionals prior to the meeting.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"… no one was expecting that we would suddenly be doing conferences over the internet … So, some of the learning was a bit more practical, like, for example, having parents come into the room first, and then other professionals join more gradually. Whereas sometimes the model's the other way around where professionals join a bit earlier to read reports and so on, and then the parent arrives into this sort of lion's den."*

This links to research on CPCs during the pandemic, highlighting the alienation felt by families when they had not been afforded the opportunity to speak to anyone prior to remote meetings (Roe, Baginsky & Eyre, 2020).

Concerns were also expressed about the possibility of digital deprivation affecting parents' practical ability to engage with professionals. Indeed, the transition to online services required parents to have a stable internet connection and a suitable device, which some did not.

> **FGC Coordinator 1:** *"I mean, the only thing I remember thinking in Camden initially was to offer most family members maybe an internet connection and so on because that could be quite tricky sometimes doing meetings on WhatsApp."*

Support was introduced via both central government and local authority schemes during the pandemic to ensure that vulnerable families were provided with access to digital media and internet connection. This initially focused on students and children in care, but later additional devices and internet connection was also made available in Camden to support other vulnerable families involved with child protection services. This would have been the responsibility of the family's social worker to arrange if a need was identified.

> **FGC Coordinator 1:** *"I think, from what I remember, they were giving even families, like, iPads or something to help them, you know, like, for the children's schooling."*

Professionals also expressed reservations about the suitability of virtual meetings for families, noting that the needs of families and professionals differ.

> **Service Manager 3:** *"And certainly, our experience is that it's … you know, it's much harder to … to sort of deliver in a relational way with families when you're online, and you … you know, you don't have that same kind of human interaction."*

It is this lack of human interaction that presents a barrier for parents and professionals. Face-to-face communication and transparency is vital to building trust between parties, and nuances of online meetings such as the use (or lack thereof) of cameras and differences in communication style can present significant challenges.

However, positive aspects of shifting to online platforms were also noted. One service manager, for example, highlights the increased availability of professionals resulting from reduced need for travel. It may be that this could also result in wider availability of advocates in addition to social care professionals.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"And, you know, sometimes you're able to get sort of harder to reach professionals to join. Like we've had consultants join where we may never have got a consultant to actually come to the office for two hours in the past."*

However, professionals suggested that a hybrid model can be less intimidating for parents as compared to a physical venue with a "sea of professionals", although further exploration of this goes beyond the scope of this study.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"[the] virtual model, the hybrid model it's sometimes called, maybe is in some ways a … a good mix, because … it is less daunting for a family. Though there may be as many people, if a lot of them are on the screen in the room, it does feel a bit more intimate … than some of those sort of bigger conferences that … that we may have been used to in the past."*

These quotes suggest that while the pandemic has had a detrimental impact on face-to-face engagement, professionals are being creative in exploring methods of engaging parents despite the move to online and hybrid meetings. While the role of the advocate in facilitating this was not discussed, their role in facilitating communication more broadly places issues such as those discussed above within their remit.

3.1.4 Effective ongoing support and training processes

Interviews echoed previous research showing that ongoing supervision is a crucial requirement for PPAs. Riley (2010) found that peers who received regular and supportive supervision were more likely to stay in advocacy roles for a longer period of time. Interviews

highlighted that such supervision needs were likely to vary depending on specific experiences.

> **Service Manager 3:** *"If you're a parent advocate supporting the family in a child protection space and you have experience of the child protection system you will need a particular type of support and supervision, if you've had experience of you know having a baby or having an early help family worker it will be a different type of supervision again."*

While general support and training is available for advocates, it was noted that specific, more tailored support would be beneficial in certain aspects of advocacy.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 1:** *"I think the support you need is based on the clients that the local authority has. Like, Camden has a lot of, like mental health, and, like, domestic violence: very specific type of dramas they deal with, you know? So having that kind of familiarity with those is … would allow you to better support that family."*

In addition to training requirements, participants noted the importance of personalised support for the PPA's emotional needs.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 1:** *"We have more peer supervisions, more chats. I have a nominated person that I can talk to if I need to, things like that … and that's very important."*

> **Service Manager 3:** *"I think my duty of care to people is sort of checking in with them afterwards and sending them a little WhatsApp and saying 'thanks very much for your contribution, you okay', and just checking in, checking in and being available."*

This feedback suggests that supervision provisions should be flexible and easily adaptable to specific needs to ensure parent advocates feel adequately supported. Those who feel supported will be more likely to engage in advocacy roles in a meaningful and consistent way and will be less likely to burn out.

Some professionals expressed concern about the risk of advocates overstepping boundaries and being able to effectively manage personal trauma in the role. In addition, Huebner, Willauer and Posze (2018) suggest that peer parent advocates may be especially vulnerable to unresolved personal challenges that impact their role. This was seen as a potential risk of peer advocacy and involving those with lived experience in the programme.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"So, the advocacy work may well surface difficult emotions, feelings for them, some of which may not be fully resolved. You know, not necessarily, but this could be a challenge for people."*

Other participants, however, challenged the assumption that peer advocates may struggle to manage their lived experience in the role.

> **Social Worker 4:** *"Can I just give a bit of a pushback on this assumption that advocates can't manage their own trauma, or manage their own emotions? ... Why do we assume that? ... You wonder if that's sometimes professionals projecting their assumptions, biases, constructs about lived experience."*

Despite these reservations, the advocates interviewed demonstrated a clear understanding of the boundaries of their role and vigilance in establishing them.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 6:** *"However there is a boundary that I should be mindful of how I share my experience and that I am not a social worker. I am there supposed to help with the process, not to give false hope, and not to complicate it."*

> **Peer Parent Advocate 6:** *"I need to be aware of the boundary, which I think is crucial … I am providing the information and support for them but not trying to sort out their problem. I can voice for them but not make the decision for them … I should always remain neutral in my position."*

Advocates also noted some potential challenges in setting and maintaining boundaries, though an awareness of these difficulties demonstrates where effective training and support can positively support peer advocates.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 5:** *"I find it difficult about boundaries. You need to have your boundaries, and you have to be very strict with boundaries in terms of what you do, how much you help … it's quite difficult to explain sometimes to families, because they feel or they believe that well, you're helping them, you know what I mean?"*

As the feedback from this study has already demonstrated, quality advocacy is key to ensuring effective parental engagement and positive outcomes. Providing adequate supervision is likely to be a critical factor in this. As a result, these quotes emphasise the importance of effective supervision, training and ongoing support for individuals who use their lived experience to support others.

3.1.5 Professional vs peer advocacy

Our data also revealed challenges associated with different types of parental advocacy. This research and literature centred on PPA, which involves someone who has lived experience with the child protection system, and professional advocacy, which involves the advocate having specific training or professional experience but no personal experience of the system. The extent to which the role of parent advocate should be professionalised is a key debate in this area. Professionals and parents in this study expressed concern that peer advocates may lack the specialist knowledge required to deal with certain aspects of advocacy.

> **Service Manager 2:** *"I mean … a professional advocate potentially has had a bit more training, they might have a … a professional background that lends itself to advocacy work with, you know, some transferable skills."*

One parent expressed concerns that peer advocates may lack specific knowledge on complex practices and procedures.

> **Parent 4:** *"Basically with a professional, they have a broader knowledge of things … whereas with the parent advocate, they won't have that extensive knowledge about how to support a parent."*

One social worker discussed the value of professional advocates who have specialist knowledge, particularly in cases where social care practitioners do not. One service manager further highlighted the professional nature of these advocates, noting that they are less likely to become emotionally invested than a peer advocate with lived experience may do. The risk of peer parental advocates bringing their own biases and emotional attachments was raised as a specific concern.

> **Service Manager 3:** *"I think for a professional advocate the advantage would be that they've got that understanding of the system they've got in a different way, from the point of view of the professional, they are less attached emotionally to the process of going through a conference."*

However, the benefit of parents being supported by someone with lived experience is key to the efficacy of their role. Peer support from those with shared experiences has been shown in research to be particularly beneficial (Bohannan, Gonzalez & Summers, 2016; Lalayants et al., 2015). Professionals specifically noted that peer advocates are potentially more likely than professional advocates to bond emotionally with parents due to a sense of solidarity in experiences.

One manager further noted that for many parents, a large number of professionals are already involved in CPCs which can feel intimidating and oppressive. The presence of a professional advocate instead of one with lived experience may compound this experience, regardless of how "good" a professional they may be.

> **Service Manager 1:** *"But then for the parent receiving the service, perhaps, doesn't have to be this way but there could be a possibility of it feeling like another professional, rather than someone who really knows what it's like and for there to be less of a connect because of that, perhaps, doesn't mean there can't be really good professional advocacy."*

While the interviews highlight that the role of neutrality and bias may be easier to navigate with professional advocates, lived experience can be a useful tool for empathising with parents on a personal level.

> **Peer Parent Advocate 5:** *"... you have that emotional attachment, so you sometimes are unknowingly triggered by things or within a conversation that resonate to your own experience, you know. So it can be a real good tool in terms of allowing the parents to know that you're not alone."*

These comments suggest that while some professionals feel that professional advocates may be better placed to navigate complex child protection processes, this was not the case

for everyone. The majority of parents, advocates and social care professionals indicated a preference for peer advocates due to the value of their lived experience uniquely positioning them to support parents in a more meaningful way. Rather than simply being “another professional” in the room, peer advocates can help to rebalance power dynamics and provide parents with tailored, empathetic support.

3.2 Final programme theory

The programme theory aims to map mechanisms in order to understand how PPA works and is implemented in Camden local authority, as well as how it is perceived to influence decision-making, power dynamics and relationships between social care professionals and families. Here, the term “mechanism” refers to the interactions, processes and structures that exist between the intervention (PPA) and how parents and professionals think, respond and feel. This enables us to explore the context and mechanisms by which the intervention generates the intended outcome.

The programme theory identifies four key mechanisms through which successful implementation of PPA supports positive parental involvement in CPC outcomes:

- **Mechanism 1:** Active PPA engagement with parents
- **Mechanism 2:** Facilitating effective communication and participation in CPCs
- **Mechanism 3:** Building and facilitating trust between social workers and parents
- **Mechanism 4:** Increasing decision-making power for parents.

These mechanisms are explored through the lens of their enabling and constraining contexts (see section 3.2.2). The final programme theory logic model sets out the context, interventions, mechanisms and anticipated outcomes of PPA implementation in Camden (see Figure 3.4). A variety of additional factors are considered within this, including the recruitment, training and oversight of peer advocates, as well as support and training available for working advocates.

3.2.1 Logic model a facilitating tool

This section presents our final programme theory based on an analysis of the themes outlined above in conjunction with the development of a logic model to fully explore the context in which the PPA programme has been successfully implemented in Camden. As explained in the methodology above (see Chapter 2), we are not attempting to answer the question “does this intervention work” but rather “what works, for whom and in which circumstances?” by identifying causal links between the effects of PPA and the specific contexts in which they operate.

3.2.1.1 Context

Complex nature of child protection services: Both parents and professionals emphasised the complexity of the child protection system and associated meetings, creating a picture of an oppressive and intimidating system due to overlapping and complex roles and terminology.[1] Social workers themselves reported difficulties in providing simple and accessible explanations to parents and at times struggled to understand the child protection processes. The complexity of child protection processes combined with "information overload" can present a challenge for parties attempting to navigate this system. This creates a power imbalance between parents and social care practitioners which can inhibit meaningful parental engagement in the process.

These comments indicate the importance of focusing on the overall "macro" level of child protection interventions in order to streamline and simplify the process and make it more accessible to parents. In addition, interviews highlighted the distinct lack of time spent between parents and professionals, as well as the feeling of being outnumbered and disempowered by professionals which impacted perceived trust in child protection services and engagement in CPCs.

Complex position of the parents: The nature of the need for intervention means that parents are already under increased strain, a position that is exacerbated by child protection involvement. Parents report a perceived power imbalance and feeling that their voices were not being heard, resulting in a lack of trust in social workers. The fear of losing children and associated stigma and shame of child protection involvement (Gibson, 2015; Chambers et al., 2019) means that parents may be reluctant to cooperate with social workers. High expectations are placed on parents who are already experiencing difficulties, with very real life-changing consequences where expectations are not met.

Positive context of advocacy in Camden: The presence of a strong and vibrant sense of community in Camden, as well as the normalisation of community support are perceived to have contributed towards enabling the positive, welcoming implementation of the PPA programme. Camden is perceived to be particularly successful in engaging voluntary and community involvement and adopts a particularly flexible approach to advocacy, focusing on continuity of relationships and building trust over an extended period of time.

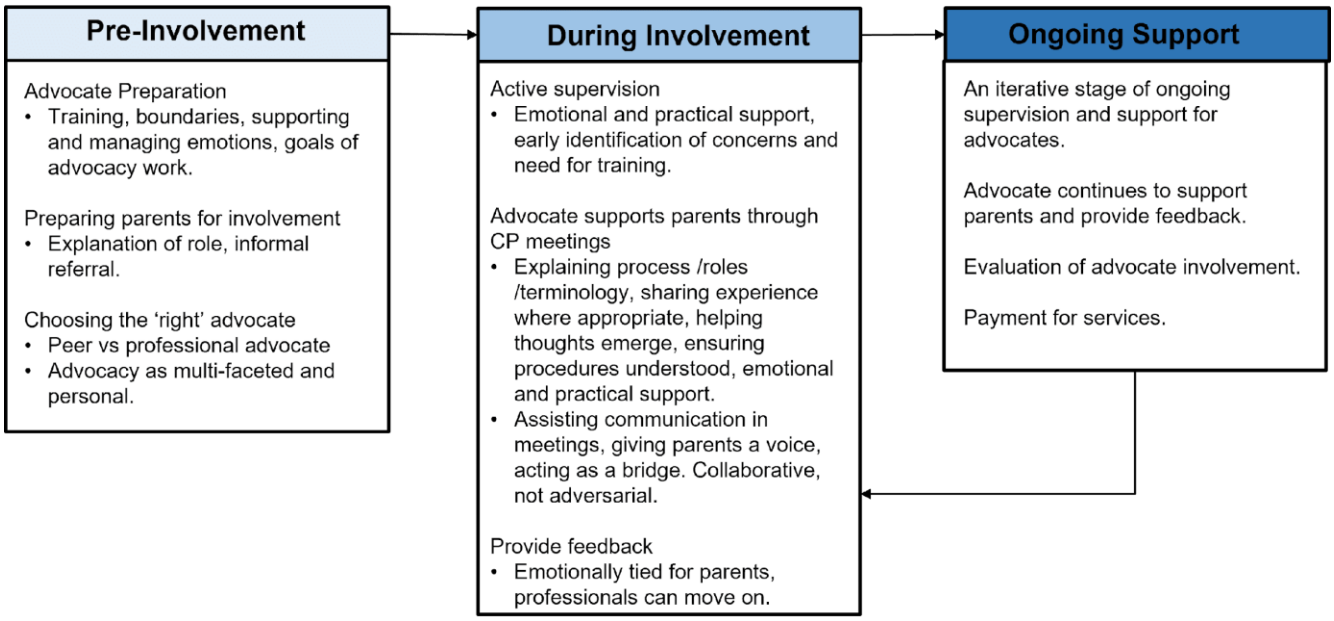
3.2.1.2 Interventions

Our research identified three distinct stages of intervention:

- Pre-advocate involvement
- During advocate involvement
- An iterative ongoing support phase (see Figure 3.1 for details).

[1] This describes perceptions of child protection services in general rather than a specific context in Camden.

Figure 3.1: Stages of intervention model



Pre-advocate involvement

Before support can begin, both advocates and parents require a period of preparation. For advocates, this includes completing an OCN-accredited qualification in parent advocacy, developed by the London Family Group Conference Learning Partnership. Additional training requirements are identified via ongoing supervision of advocates, and they also have ongoing access to Camden training available to social workers. Parents who require child protection involvement will be informed about PPA by their social worker and given the opportunity to work with an advocate. Parents can self-refer or request referral for an advocate by their social worker. An important aspect of this matching process is the need to choose the "right" advocate for the parent, peer or professional. Advocates and parents are matched on a flexible and personalised basis with specific needs such as language, culture and gender accommodated. Personality is also taken into account with the programme recognising that some parents may need a more direct approach and others a softer one. Both parents and advocates also have the option to request a new advocate be allocated to the parent if they feel the match does not work. This research has highlighted that the needs of no two parents are the same and the role of the advocate is becoming increasingly multifaceted.

Active advocate involvement

The involvement phase begins when a peer advocate is assigned to a parent. During this phase, the advocate's role is to support parents through CP meetings, acting as a bridge with professionals. In this context, a good advocate is perceived as facilitating rather than replacing parents in decision-making. The peer advocate will receive active and ongoing supervision via monthly Family Advisory Board meetings and coordinator meetings and

weekly check-ins with a supervisor, either face to face or online depending on the advocate's needs.

Ongoing support phase

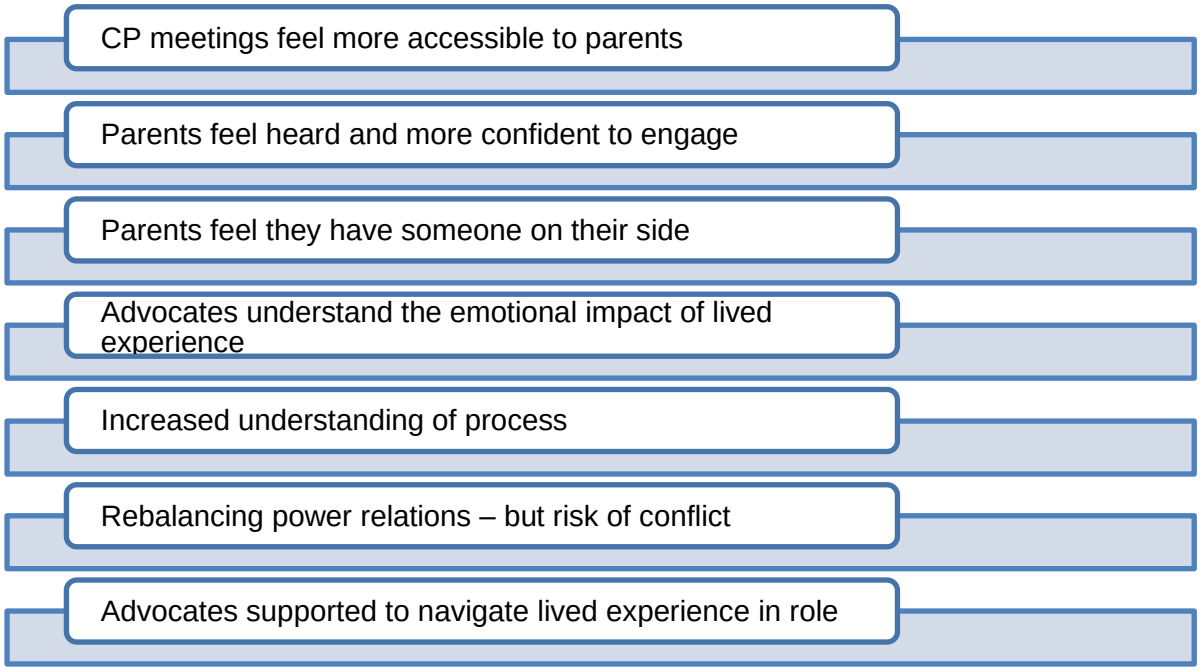
Following this, an iterative ongoing support phase will commence. Advocates will continue to support parents and provide feedback, as well as receive ongoing support themselves. Upon completion of the work, advocates' involvement will be evaluated and they are paid for their work. Advocates are currently paid on the same level as Family Group Coordinators and work on a freelance, hourly paid basis. This enables independence, flexibility and control over their workload. The ending of peer advocacy collaboration is based on mutual agreement between parents and advocates. However, the advocacy programme in Camden is ultimately focused on navigating the child protection process, so where CPC involvement ends, advocacy support will be reviewed by all parties.

It is important to note that these three stages of intervention are both iterative and often concurrent. The process of providing support will often progress back and forth between the active involvement and iterative ongoing support phases, and where peer advocates support more than one parent, they may experience more than one stage of intervention concurrently.

3.2.2 Mechanisms for successful PPA implementation

The logic model identifies key enabling mechanisms that can help to achieve the intended outcomes of effective PPA implementation. Mechanisms in this context refer to the relationships, thought processes and feelings associated with the role of PPAs which if positively implemented can help to achieve the intended outcomes and impact. The model first identifies seven broad processes (see Figure 3.2) which underpin the impact of the mechanism's resource (the PPA programme) on the reasoning of stakeholders (both parents and peer advocates).

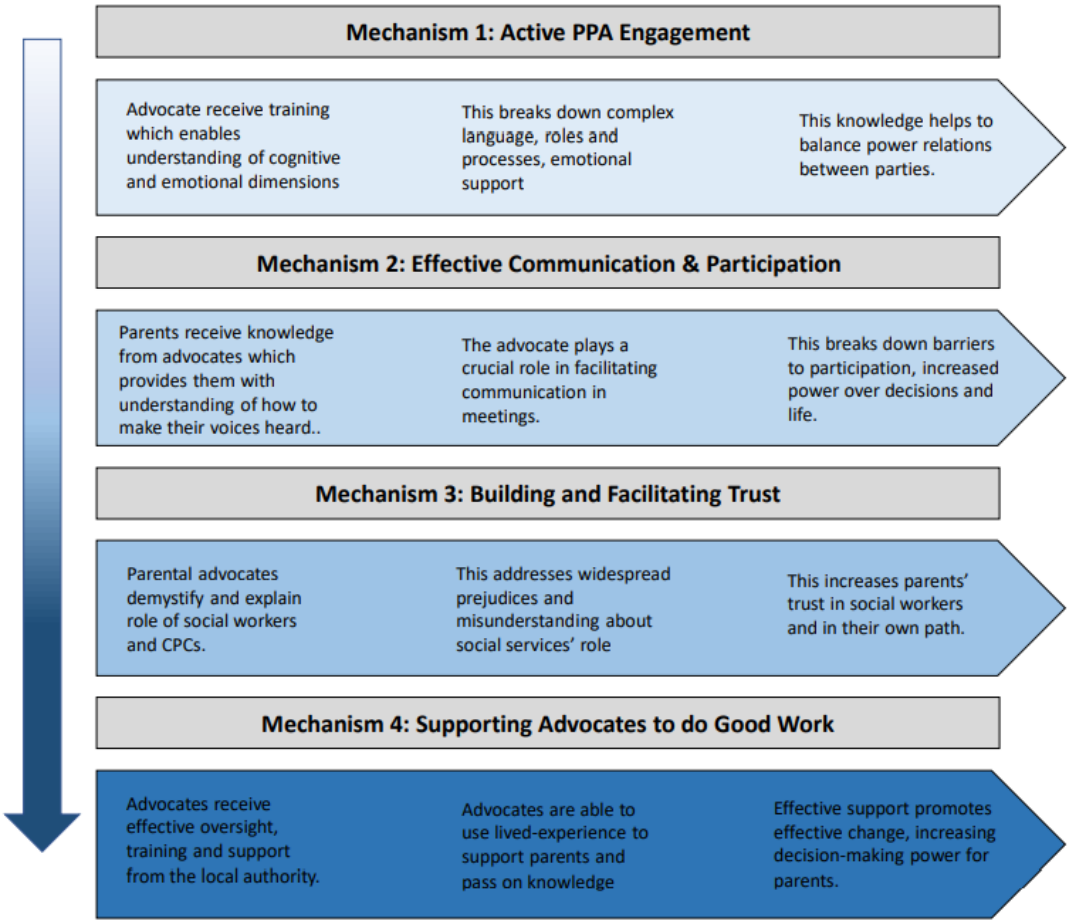
Figure 3.2: Key processes underpinning mechanism resource



These key reasoning mechanisms were further evaluated to identify four key mechanisms supporting effective PPA implementation in Camden, taking into account context, the resource (or PPA programme), the reasoning and decision-making processes of stakeholders, and intended and unintended outcomes of the programme.

1. Active PPA engagement with parents.
2. Enabling effective communication and participation.
3. Building and facilitating trust.
4. Increasing decision-making power for parents.

Figure 3.3: Key mechanisms for effective PPA implementation



Mechanism 1: Active PPA engagement with parents

The first key mechanism for effective advocacy implementation is the role of active engagement between the parent and peer advocate. This is key at all three stages of advocate involvement with parents:

- During the pre-involvement phase, the preparation of advocates enables them to understand both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of their role and the value of their lived experience. This enables them to actively engage and collaborate with parents, increasing parents' trust in the capability of the child protection system.
- During active involvement, the advocate provides emotional support and breaks down complex language, roles and processes, increasing parents' understanding of processes and procedures and ensuring they feel heard and have someone on their side. This in turn helps to balance power relations in the CP process.

- Finally, during the iterative support phase, ongoing training and feedback is valuable for improving engagement and identifying areas where further support or ongoing training is required.

Mechanism 2: Enabling effective communication and participation

The second mechanism is the role of advocates in enabling effective communication and participation between parents and professionals when actively involved in CPCs (the second phase of involvement):

- Parent advocates play a crucial role in promoting effective communication in CPCs, providing parents with knowledge and understanding of the processes. Feeling they have someone on their side enables parents to feel more confident to express their wishes.

- In practice, this may involve the advocate supporting the parent to speak out, or alternatively, being the voice of the parent where they lack confidence. This is critical in breaking down barriers to participation in CP meetings.

- The potential complexity of social workers receiving critiques from parents, however, presents a barrier to effective implementation of this mechanism. This rebalancing of power coupled with the risk of adversarial consequences can lead to conflict, which can potentially inhibit effective communication.

Mechanism 3: Building and facilitating trust

The third key mechanism is the role of advocates in building and facilitating trust between social workers and parents:

- During the pre-involvement phase prior to active support in CPCs, the PPA's role is to demystify the role of the social worker and child protection services. Greater understanding leads to increased trust, more actively engaged parents, and helps to address widespread prejudice and stigma surrounding the involvement of social services.

- Promoting trust and faith in child protection services is also key during the second active phase of involvement, as this continues to break down barriers to parents' engagement and confidence.

Mechanism 4: Effectively supporting advocates to do good work

The final mechanism considers the need to appropriately and effectively support advocates to do good work. This is key throughout all three stages of involvement where peer advocates receive ongoing supervision, training and support.

- Where competent and ongoing supervision is provided, advocates feel empowered to use their lived experience to support parents and pass on their own knowledge and experiences. In turn, this iterative process provides parents with the appropriate skills

and knowledge to effectively participate in CPCs as outlined in mechanisms two and three.

3.2.3 Anticipated outcomes of successful PPA implementation

Finally, the logic model is used as an aid to explore the anticipated behavioural outcomes where successful implementation of peer parental advocacy is achieved.

1. Greater understanding and awareness of the child protection process and meetings will lead to more parents actively and positively engaging in the process.

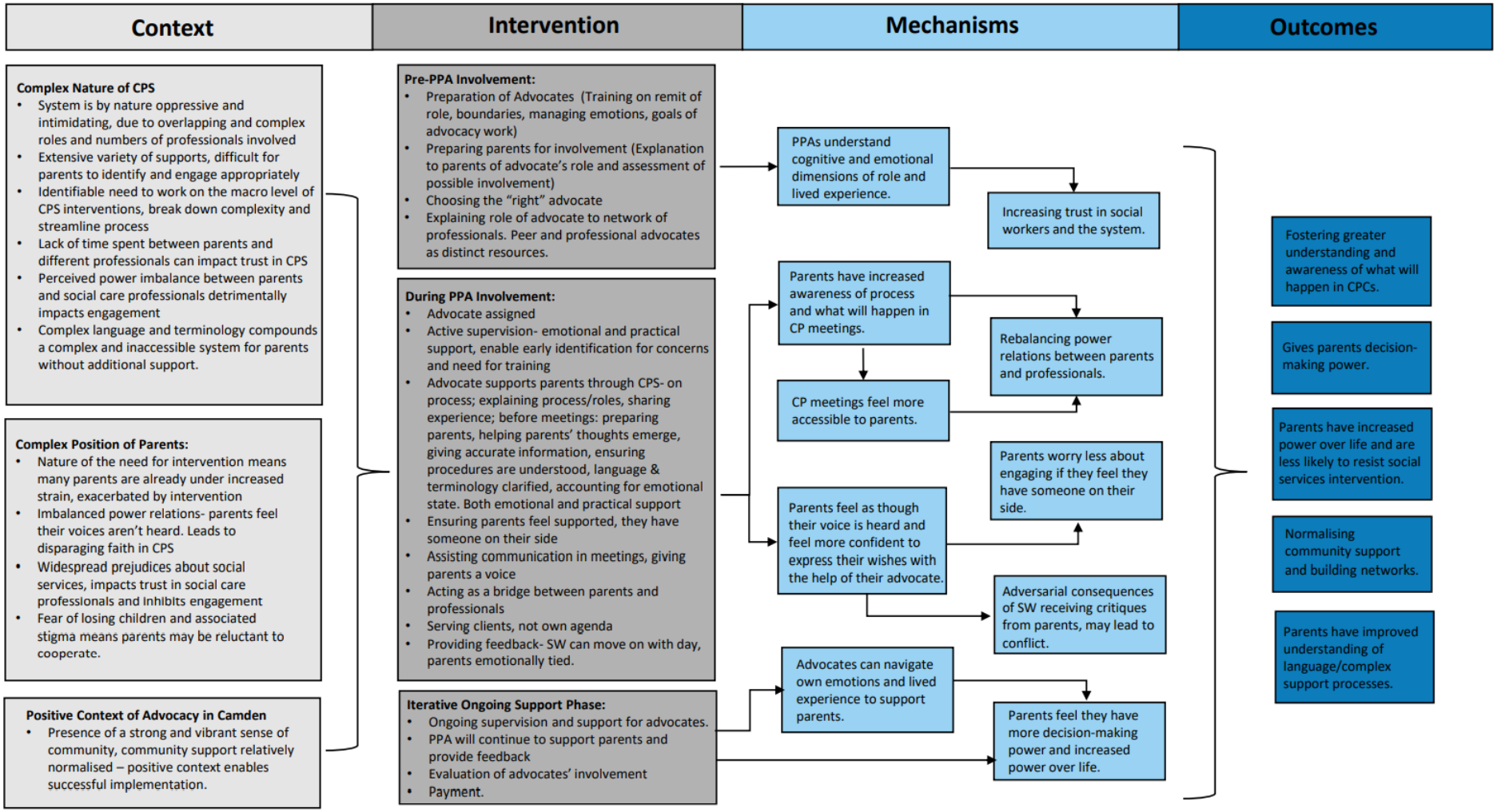
2. An improved understanding of language/complex processes means that parents are able to communicate effectively in meetings leading to greater engagement.

3. Parents feel they have increased decision-making power which gives them confidence to actively participate and engage in CPCs, resulting in positive working relations between parties and a less adversarial approach.

4. Parents have increased power over their life which makes them more open to child protection intervention and able to actively work with professionals to improve outcomes for themselves and their children.

5. These processes result in improved community support and network building which provide parents with additional support when parent advocacy intervention ends, which can help continue positive outcomes for parents' post-child protection involvement.

Figure 3.4: Final programme theory logic model



4. Discussion

This section draws together our key findings, linking the context, interventions, mechanisms and outcomes developed as part of our final programme theory. It explores and refines our if–then statements developed as part of our IPT to demonstrate the active links between intervention–mechanism–outcome and the context of successful implementation of the peer parental advocacy programme in Camden.

4.1 Development of if–then statements in effective PPA implementation

Through utilising the realist logical model via an iterative process of data collection, we have been able to refine and develop a series of statements that explore how PPA has been perceived as effective in Camden and consequently how it may be implemented again in a similar context.

Statement 1: If PPAs receive effective and tailored preparation, training and supervision, then they are able to gain appropriate insights and understanding about the cognitive and emotional dimensions of their role and the value of their lived experience. As a result, they possess the relevant knowledge to effectively support parents through the child protection process, thus increasing trust in social workers and the child protection system. This leads to a greater awareness of the process among parents and promotes an improved understanding of complex language and support processes.

Statement 2: If PPAs provide parents with appropriate knowledge around roles, processes and language then parents have an increased awareness of the process and what will happen in CPCs because this information is more likely to be disseminated in a more accessible and transparent way. As a result, CPCs feel more accessible to parents who feel more able to actively engage, resulting in a rebalance of power relations between parents and professionals. Consequently, this increases parents' decision-making power and encourages parents to actively collaborate with social service interventions.

Statement 3: If PPAs can find the right balance in helping parents' thought to emerge, assist communication in meetings and help parents to make their voices heard in CPCs, then parents feel as though they are being heard, that their voice has value and feel more confident to express their wishes with the help of their advocate. The knowledge that they have someone working in their interests helps parents to worry less about engaging in the process which can lead to increased collaboration, increased decision-making power and network building. However, if this balance is not met then PPA involvement can result in adversarial consequences, leading to increased conflict and reduced parental engagement and power over life.

Statement 4: If advocates receive iterative ongoing supervision and support, they feel better able to navigate their own emotions and lived experience and develop more skills to appropriately support parents. This positive intervention helps parents to feel they have increased decision-making power and control over their life, resulting in increased collaboration with child protection services.

4.2 Key mechanisms and their enabling contexts

The programme theory outlined above seeks to illustrate the context of successful advocacy implementation in Camden. Since the project began, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England, published in May 2021, recommended that all families involved with child protection services should be offered parental representation in the form of a national rollout. In support of this recommendation, it noted "transformative examples" of parent advocacy that kept children safely with their families (MacAlister, 2022: p.86). In light of this, it seems likely that the use of parent advocacy services in England may increase in the next few years. Usefully, this mixed-method evaluation into PPA services in Camden provides an early evidence base into how such programmes can be implemented successfully and within what contexts.

The programme theory outlines a context within which the implementation of a peer advocacy programme has been largely successful, although areas for improvement have been highlighted. While it is recognised that child protection processes in other local authorities may vary in their context, we hope that the positive feedback from the Camden programme provides a starting point from which further peer parental advocacy programmes can be explored further afield. This research builds on early evidence that suggests that parental advocacy can assist parents and social workers to build more positive working relationships and act as a "bridge" between parents and social workers (Diaz et al., forthcoming).

This evaluation particularly highlights the difficult position in which parents involved with child protection find themselves. It mirrors early research which suggests that effective partnership working can be difficult to translate in these circumstances. For example, Corby, Millar & Young's (1996) analysis of parents' views on CPCs found that parents without the support of a parent advocate were particularly anxious, many felt like objects and there was an implicit understanding between social workers and parents that compliance was a key contributor in deterring further escalation of social care involvement. Consequently, parents felt that being open, especially about areas of disagreement, was potentially a risk, and felt inhibited to share their thoughts and feelings.

However, as a result of the work of advocates, there is a growing understanding that the removal of children is not the ultimate goal of intervention. The crucial role of advocates in enabling communication and helping parents to make their voices heard has been key to rebalancing power relations and helping parents to feel confident in expressing their thoughts and feelings in CPCs. This finding aligns with previous literature which suggests that PPAs function as a form of "conduit" (Acri et al., 2021: p.19) or "cultural broker"

(Marcenko et al., 2010). The role of peer advocates in rebuilding trust between the parties should not therefore be underestimated.

Previous literature has highlighted practitioners' recognition of the pressures of child protection work and burdensome caseloads. For example, Darlington, Healy & Feeney's (2010) study found that practitioners identified a lack of time due to high caseloads and onerous paperwork. Parents in this evaluation also recognised social workers' caseloads as a concern, aligning with previous research suggesting that parents feel empathy for social workers who appear "tired, burned out and stressed" (Diaz, 2020) despite their own challenging circumstances. In contrast, capacity for peer parental advocates was not perceived to be an issue with an average case load of three parents per advocate with a maximum allocation of six parents. This was seen as beneficial to both parents and advocates and key to building trusting relationships between the parties. Ongoing recruitment processes also meant overall capacity and allocation was not a key concern within this local authority. These findings demonstrate the significance of the PPA's role and unique position to create understanding between both parties and opening up communication streams.

This evaluation has particularly highlighted the importance of the PPA's role in rebalancing power relations between parents and social workers. Frame, Berrick & Knittel (2010) posited that parents involved in the child protection system are often surrounded by professionals – social workers, health visitors, mental health workers, lawyers, and so on – who, despite their best intentions, are unable to empathise or relate to them from a personal perspective. This can inhibit effective parental engagement and participation, leaving parents feeling disempowered and unheard. PPAs therefore represent a crucial component of balancing power relations in favour of parents, understanding parents' feelings and experiences, and helping them to feel heard within a sea of professionals.

4.3 Barriers to implementation

Although this evaluation demonstrates how successful implementation of a PPA programme can potentially improve parents' engagement in CPCs, it has also identified challenges to implementation and how these could be overcome.

One key concern related to the extent to which PPAs are or should be professionalised. This links to previous literature which found that PPAs may have limited experience of the professional nature of the role and will require training and ongoing support to understand the requirements of a paraprofessional role (Berrick, Cohen & Anthony, 2011; Frame, Berrick & Knittel, 2010). However, Frame, Berrick & Knittel (2010) caution that a balance needs to be struck between providing sufficient training to develop PPA's skills and knowledge while ensuring they are not over-professionalised to the extent that they become another professional in the room. In Camden, this balance is met by PPAs completing a OCN qualification prior to engaging in the role of advocate.

PPAs are also required to balance professionalism with managing their own lived experience. Prior research identifies effective supervision as crucial to ensure PPAs feel

more supported to remain in their roles for longer (Riley, 2010). Similarly, this evaluation has highlighted the importance of ongoing flexible supervision and accessible support for PPAs throughout all stages of intervention, enabling them to appropriately support parents on a more personable level than their professional counterparts.

A further barrier to implementation identified was challenges to the power balance in a pre-existing child protection system, and risks associated with adversarial style advocacy. Frame, Berrick & Knittel (2010) suggest that as PPA runs contrary to the dominant, prescriptive, professionally led approach to case management, some practitioners may feel threatened by the inclusion of PPAs and find the challenge to established ways of practice or policy difficult to receive. However, this evaluation portrayed a positive understanding of the role of PPAs from professionals, with clear recognition of the value of their role. While it is recognised that this may reflect the positive context and perceptions of advocacy in Camden in particular, it demonstrates the potential of PPA where it is implemented successfully.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Strengths and limitations

There were a number of strengths to this evaluation:

- This is the most extensive evaluation of a PPA service in England and Wales.
- While the sample is relatively small, we obtained a wide range of data.
- The use of PPA within Camden Council's children's services department was highlighted by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care as an example of innovative practice (MacAlister, 2022). This enabled us to develop our logic model based on a geographic area whereby PPA has already been recognised as being innovative.

There were also some limitations to this research:

- The research site was limited to one local authority (Camden). This restricts us in terms of drawing comparisons with other PPA services.
- The sample size for the study was relatively small. As the evaluation focused on one geographic area and one PPA service, we were limited in relation to the recruitment of participants.
- Participants (for interviews, observations and focus groups) were reached via the local authority or PPA service who acted as a gateway for recruitment; this adds to a risk of sample bias.

5.2 Conclusions

Key themes emerging from this data include the complexity of the child protection system and the valuable role of peer advocates in building trust while rebalancing power relations between social workers and parents.

The thematic analysis identified that:

- Parents reported feeling judged and disempowered, resulting in overwhelming feelings of anger and upset. Because of their lived experience, advocates are perceived as uniquely positioned to provide parents with essential emotional and practical support
- The context within which child protection services operate across the UK remains problematic, with overly complex processes, high expectations of parents, heavy caseloads for social workers and inaccessible language and terminology

- Participants emphasised the typical power imbalance between parents, social workers and other professionals which had a negative impact on parents' perceived ability to engage effectively

- COVID-19 had a notable impact on PPA services in Camden, with a reduction in advocacy activity and online meeting requirements further inhibiting parental engagement. However, ongoing hybrid meetings have helped parents to feel less intimidated when confronted with a room of social care professionals

- There is considerable debate over how far PPA should be professionalised. Some participants advocated for professional advocates with specialist knowledge, while the majority highlighted the benefits of peer advocates in providing emotional support and solidarity in addressing the power imbalance.

Key mechanisms that underpin successful implementation of PPA programmes include:

- **Active engagement with parents:** Advocates are perceived as critical to helping parents understand complex processes, terminology and expectations before and during CPCs, resulting in increased engagement and collaboration

- **Enabling effective communication and participation:** PPA's abilities to facilitate effective communication and collaboration between the parties was viewed as critical to empowering parents to play a meaningful role in decision-making

- **Building and facilitating trust:** The peer advocacy role is critical in 'bridging the gap' between parents and professionals, generating trust between the parties and beginning to address stigma and negative perceptions of child protection intervention

- **Effectively supporting advocates to do good work:** Advocates need to receive effective training and feel appropriately supported during all stages of intervention. Supervision provisions need to be flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of the advocate. Advocates should also be able to work in an employed role, rather than be expected to undertake work voluntarily. Professional advocates (without lived experience) would have the expectation of receiving pay and therefore this should be the same for PPAs. This is key to ensuring they feel recognised and valued in their role. Those who feel more supported are more likely to engage in advocacy roles in a meaningful and consistent way.

Even at this early stage of evaluation, these findings highlight the clear value of PPA in supporting parents through the child protection process. Consequently, this evaluation contributes to an early evidence base in the UK context on the successful implementation of advocacy programmes. It provides a starting point from which further advocacy programmes can be explored throughout England, in line with recommendations from the recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

5.3 Recommendations

Our evaluation has highlighted experiences, attitudes to and mechanisms of PPA in Camden, and we have discussed the perceived impact of PPA in benefiting relations between parents and social workers. Parents, peer advocates and professionals all perceived the PPA programme to be a success in Camden, and we make the following recommendations based on our evaluation.

Further investment in PPA in other local authorities

The promising findings of our evaluation suggest a need for other local authorities to explore the use of and invest in PPA services. By improving the relationship between parent and professional, this subsequently improved parental engagement in child protection social work, with potential for transformative outcomes.

Further evaluation of PPA services

From this evaluation, we perceive PPA in Camden to be successful; however, it is unclear as to how well PPA can translate to other local authorities where there may be different challenges. Therefore, PPA should be evaluated in other local authorities to assess if the findings from this evaluation hold up in other contexts.

Evaluating comparison groups

PPA should be evaluated more widely using a comparison group/s who receive no advocacy or have received professional advocacy. Our evaluation found a clear preference from parents in respect of wanting an advocate with lived experience, and exploring comparison groups will help in understanding if our encouraging findings translate to other forms of advocacy. It will also provide an opportunity to test the mechanisms of our programme theory.

Tailored support and supervision for PPAs

The findings of our study also highlight a need for personalised support and training to be provided to PPAs, specifically in relation to complex social work procedures and to address any personal trauma that may arise. Therefore, robust, personalised supervision and training for PPAs is required to ensure challenges are managed and PPAs can engage in their roles meaningfully.

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What Works *for* Children's Social Care

EARLY INTERVENTION FOUNDATION

Coming together as What Works for Early Intervention & Children's Social Care

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