



## New designs on digital support for parents

NCT is nine months into a partnership with design charity Shift, to create a brand new digital service to help even more parents feel confident and capable in the first 1000 days of their child's life. Here, Sarah McMullen (Head of Knowledge, NCT) and Tayo Medupin (Innovation Lead, Shift) describe the progress of this exciting project, and how you can get involved.

### Working with Shift - three strands of value

Shift are a design charity who build products and services to solve social problems, with one focus being to improve infant emotional wellbeing. They share NCT's focus on the first 1,000 days, and understanding of the critical role that parents play in laying the foundations for their children's future health and emotional wellbeing.

We used these ideas to create three distinct design concepts that could truly support more parents to feel confident and capable in the first 1000 days of their child's life.

NCT is setting out on an ambitious Forward Agenda – to strengthen core services, increase our reach and scope of support for parents, and modernise our image. Our partnership with Shift brings significant expertise and experience in product and service design, as well as a well developed approach to generating three strands of value, which sit at the core of their work:

- Social value - the measurable and sustainable impact of the product against its intended outcomes
- User value - the ability of the product to meet user needs and drive demand amongst target audiences
- Commercial value - the potential for the product or service to be scalable and sustainable

As a charity supporting parents, NCT has a strong focus on social value – whether by making a difference to parents through campaign and policy work, sharing knowledge and supporting informed decision-making, or providing practical and emotional support in a range of contexts. And to achieve social value, we need to design services that expectant and new parents will engage with and value.

Yet, establishing user value is often missing during the early part of developing new products or services in organisations such as NCT. Working with Shift has been a fantastic opportunity to focus hard on those who matter most – expectant and new parents from a range of backgrounds and communities – to really understand what drives them to access support and how to remove barriers to access, so that we design a service that truly meets their needs.

Read Shift's paper on their "[three strands of value](#)" design approach

## Foundational research

Over the past two years Shift has conducted academic and policy literature reviews, interviews with experts (including academics in infant and parental mental health and frontline workers such as health visitors) and parents experiencing multiple disadvantages. This allowed Shift to understand the causes and risk factors for poor emotional development of infants, and explore the behaviours and actions that can protect against this. It has led to the development of an evidence-based Theory of Change that provides a framework for understanding where interventions may be targeted to improve infant emotional development in the first thousand days.

At the heart of our Theory of Change is the concept of infant attachment. Infant attachment is the extent to which a child feels they can receive comfort and safety from their parent or caregiver, and is key to healthy emotional development. Children with secure attachments to their parents or caregivers tend to have greater emotional self-regulation as adults and develop greater resilience to life events. Parental self-efficacy, or the extent to which a parent believes they are able to accomplish the task at hand, is a significant factor influencing the parent-child relationship.

Each factor identified within the Theory of Change as contributing to secure attachment offers a different opportunity to support new parents. Some factors, such as economic and environmental context, may require

intervention at the community or society level, including coordinated policy changes within areas such as housing, welfare and economic policy. Others, including social support, emotional wellbeing and parental knowledge, can also be tackled at the individual level. This is where NCT's direct support for parents has always focused, and where we have the potential to increase the reach and impact of our work.

For more detail on the Theory of Change and evidence on which it is based, see [Shift's full report](#)

See also '[Introducing parents to attachment theory](#)' by NCT tutor Helen Hans.

## **Concept development and testing**

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Building on Shift's research, our partnership began with workshops with key NCT stakeholders. These ensured that we had a shared understanding of what success looks like, the scope and boundaries of the project and product to be developed, and the intended audience. The Shift team then completed a series of short interviews, in-home ethnographies and focus groups with parents across the UK, as well as visiting Sure Start centres and antenatal classes. They also spoke to NCT practitioners and volunteers. This generated rich insight into the challenges facing parents, and the drivers and barriers to accessing support.

In May 2017, we held a co-creation workshop, inviting 30 people (including parents, NCT practitioners, trainee midwives and NCT volunteers) to work together, using the insights we had gathered. Teams helped define what the new digital service should be, what it might do and how it might look. We used these ideas to craft three distinct design concepts that could truly support more parents to feel confident and capable in the first thousand days of their child's life.

We have since tested these three design concepts with parents across the UK, through an online voting and feedback form plus interviews with parents, volunteers and practitioners. This has generated another wave of rich insight to help us understand what our target audience would most value and engage with. We have used these data to decide which concept to develop and test further over the coming months.

## **Get involved in the next stage of development!**

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We're really grateful for the invaluable input the project has received so far from parents, practitioners and volunteers. Shift's way of working is really good fun, and we've made huge progress in a short space of time. If you'd like to get involved in the next stage of development, or think your local branch volunteers and members would be keen to be involved as a focus group, then please do get in touch via [tayo.medupin@shiftdesign.org.uk](mailto:tayo.medupin@shiftdesign.org.uk).