

Home-Start report to Witney Town Council

March 2023



Our group support for families with under 5's in Witney is delivered by our dedicated Witney Group Coordinator, Jan Crystal, and a dedicated group of 6 volunteers.

Jan and her team are supported by our wider team, including the Head of Family Support, providing line management, caseload support, volunteer recruitment and training, and high-quality safeguarding.

We have two part-time family Coordinators and home-visiting volunteers who support families in the Town and surrounding area, 1:1 in their home and community.

Witney Town Council specifically funds our group programme in Witney. This report covers our activities from April 2022 to date.

Local Context

This year has seen families in Witney facing unprecedented financial pressure due to the cost-of-living crisis and we have seen an increased need for outreach to families for support with these pressures – families who were already facing the challenges of leaving abusive relationships, mental ill health and parenting children with additional needs or going through the process of a diagnosis where waiting lists are long, and support is limited.

Grants have been sourced to supply carpet to a lone parent and baby who moved into social housing with no carpets or flooring in freezing conditions and for white goods such as a fridge freezer for a family with 4 children who were unable to afford a new one due to the impact of increasing energy bills. The Coordinator has supported families by attending Team Around the Family meetings and completing forms for housing applications and benefits. In addition to sustaining an engaging and high-quality programme of group work to families in the community the Coordinator has provided outreach and 1:1 support to 7 families.

Funding from Witney Town Council has helped Home-Start Oxford to sustain and grow a unique and comprehensive service for families with children under 5s in Witney. All group work is supported by a committed and experienced team of volunteers, without whom we couldn't achieve the programme of work.

Little Splashers – Methodist Church

A baby group for under 1s every Tuesday afternoon where parents come along and enjoy singing, stories, sign and sensory play. The babies engage with mum during the session on a 1-1 basis. It is face focused and interactive, modelling facial expressions, actions and signing to baby – promoting positional language and early literacy. At times where there has been a large waiting list the Coordinator and volunteer offer a second session in the same afternoon for 4-6 weeks during which time space is often created for new families by babies who have turned one moving on to the Puddle Jumpers group. Group attendance is limited to 15 families each week. **66 families have taken part over the course of the year and 8 families have recently been added to the waiting list.** Health Visitors often recommend the group to new parents. This year we have seen Mums and babies attending with maternal grandmothers and Dads joining Mums at the group. This really highlights the inclusive and holistic whole family approach that we achieve.

'I volunteer for Home-Start because I think it is a brilliant, charitable organisation that supports young families. It is an incredibly hard job bringing up a family and over the years more and more government support has been withdrawn so organisations such as Home-Start are vital. Since Covid this has been even more evident and I have witnessed first-hand through my son and daughter in law how having a new baby with no external support has been very difficult.

I gain a tremendous amount of satisfaction from the time I spend helping Jan to run the baby group 'Little Splashers'. It is a joy to watch the parents/carers grow in confidence and develop long lasting and supportive friendships with the others who attend the group.

At the end of the hour I feel I have done something worthwhile'



Puddle Jumpers – Methodist Church

We continue to deliver a weekly Puddle Jumpers stay and play session for all families and their children 0-5 at the Methodist Church with an average attendance of 15-20 families each week. The sessions are inspired by the Peep Learning Together programme and has proved to be a staple for the community. The group offers a pathway for families who have attended the Little Splashers group until their babies turn 1 meaning they can move on to an environment that they feel confident in, continuing peer support for parents and great social and learning opportunities for the children. Once a month the group meet outside the church for a buggy walk or trips to community settings such as the library or fire station.

'My son really enjoyed the songs – plus it was useful for me to learn them as he loves me singing to him at home now!'

Puddle Jumpers – Ceewood Hall, Smiths Estate

Families on the Smiths Estate, Deer Park and Kingfisher Estate have had no provision for children under 5. This left families feeling isolated until our Puddle Jumpers stay and play session started in January 2022. **The group runs on a Monday each week and has grown to 48 families registered with 15 families on average attending weekly.** Since January 2023 we have provided a soup for lunch at the end of each session and plans are under way to deliver a slow cooker course later in 2023. We are in planning stages to hold a FREE Family Fun Day at Ceewood Hall in the May Half term.

'My little one really enjoys it here. I don't usually do stuff like this, its way out of my comfort zone but I'm doing it for her. She really likes it.'

Peep Groups – by invitation

We plan 3 six-week courses over a year for referred families in Witney. October saw our first group with 9 referrals from Health Visitors and Family Solutions for a group of young parents with babies under 1. We found engagement from this group to be challenging, we believe due to the high levels of anxiety of parents. In previous sessions, Health Visitors attended with parents to support initial engagement, but due to their time pressures this did not occur. It is one example of the impacts of Covid we are seeing – heightened need; heightened reluctance to socialise, and increased pressures on the services we aim to work in partnership with (and therefore increased isolation of parents in need). We have therefore changed our focus for subsequent PEEP sessions, as detailed below.

In December 2022 the Home-Start Family Group Coordinator was approached by a volunteer from Care4Calais requesting donations of children's clothes for the families who were recently moved into the Witney Hotel. Home-Start has sourced clothes, books and pushchairs for the families. At the beginning of March 2023, we started our second Peep Group of 6 play sessions in the hotel for the families with children under 5. We have worked closely with Care4Calais and the Health Visiting Team to enable this group – our aim is to provide an opportunity for children to experience some joy and happiness within an environment that is very restricted. Children's response to the group environment have been varied – some have thrived in the environment while others have appeared overwhelmed and tearful and need to sit with Mum for the entirety of the group for reassurance. Language was not a barrier to the singing session, when all parents and children joined in by following the actions to the nursery rhymes.

Other Activities



Our summer events were popular amongst local families due to including older children. They ran on Mondays and Wednesdays throughout August at different outdoor locations to ensure they were accessible to all. We provided a free lunch for the children sourced from the Oxford Food Hub. **70 families attended and a number of**

these were new families who are now attending our groups. Cogges and Bridewell have continued to offer sessions for families supported by Home-Start Oxford these have included day trips to Bridewell Gardens with use of their minibus to transport families who do not drive and cooking and sewing sessions at Cogges Farm. Summer events will go ahead again in August 2023, and we are hoping to work with YouMove to provide sports activities for older children.

Financial Update

We are on course to fully spend our grant from Witney Town Council, with projections for the year ending 31st March 2023, being approximately break-even.

We have managed to close a funding gap, as outlined in our application, having requested £21,500 and been awarded £10,000, against a total project cost of £41,000. We are extremely grateful for the valued support of the Town Council. This vital funding has helped leverage donations from Councillor Andrew Coles, Sanctuary, Cottsway, and smaller donations from local trusts, in addition to grants we had received from BBC Children in Need and The Henry Smith Charity.

We also have valued support of £5,000 p.a. from West Oxfordshire District Council who are considering a move to Service Level Agreements (a very welcome development, although we will need to bid with no guarantees of success). Otherwise almost all our funding is one-year only, meaning we have to sustain a high investment in fundraising, and whether high levels of uncertainty.

If there is any prospect of a move by the Town Council to consider multi-year funding, we would very much welcome this, as it would give greater stability and make our service more cost-effective, if we were supported in this way.

Other

We are proud and active members of local networks, including the West Oxfordshire Voluntary Sector Forum, and Mental Health West Forum. We have active networks 'on the ground' particularly with Kerry Harris from WODC and groups like the Witney Shed, Baby Bank and more. We value these partnerships and collaborations.