

Report to Witney Town Council – Youth Services Grant March 2024

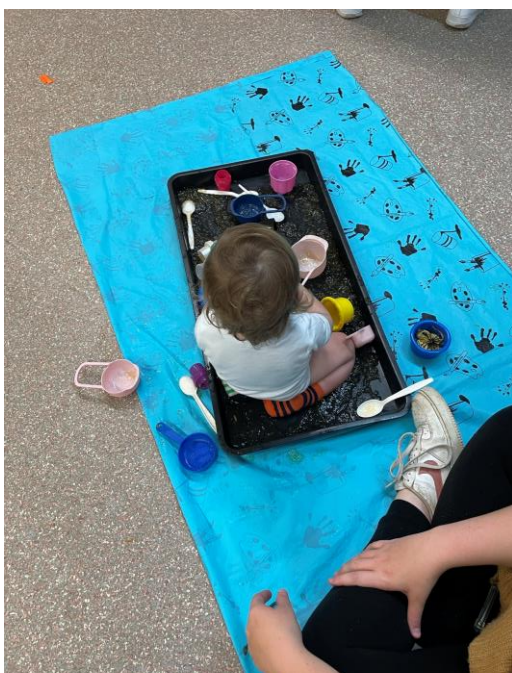
Home-Start Oxford have been supporting struggling families with children under 5 across Central and West Oxfordshire for over 35 years. We are experienced in supporting families through challenges that include mental health issues, poverty, disability, refugeehood, isolation and domestic abuse. The support we give families is offered through both one-to-one home-visiting, and a raft of inclusive, nurturing groups.

Our group work in Witney is now a well-established and much relied upon source of support for families of young children in the town. The support from Witney Town Council in previous years has made this possible, and the award of £10,000 through the Youth Grant Award in December 2023 has enabled us to continue our vital work and make plans for the months ahead. The first six month's allocation of the grant (£5,000) has been fully spent. This was especially vital as Home-Start has had to operate with a deficit budget in 2023-4, projecting c. - £40,000 to 31.3.24, with the funding gap being covered by reserves. We will take the balance of £5,000 into the 2024-5 financial year to fund activities up to September 2024. We find that match funding from Witney Town Council is a very important mark of local support, that helps to incentive other funders.

This short report provides an update on the funding spent so far and how we intend to use the remainder of the grant.

Our provision

Our open-to-all groups for babies and toddlers deliver community connection and preventative support. Run by expert staff and trained volunteers they support mental health, play, attachment, and early learning. We have continued to deliver our weekly groups at various Witney locations:



- **Little Splashers Baby Group:** weekly for under 1s, at Witney Methodist Church
- **Puddle Jumpers:** weekly for 0-5s, Ceewood Hall, Smiths Estate
- **Puddle Jumpers:** weekly for 0-5s, Witney Methodist Church. Once a month this session is an outdoor buggy walk – as well as encouraging families out into the fresh air we try and promote free places to visit and give opportunities to families who cannot drive to visit local places. Our most recent visit was to Witney Library.



In addition we run:

- **10 Free Summer Fun Days:** run in outdoor spaces and parks around Witney, these include games, craft, messy fun, free snack and lunch, baby facilities and activities for older children.
- **3 PEEP Learning Together Groups:** evidence-based 6-week programmes for children and families facing high levels of need. These groups are flexible and responsive to arising need and are for families who have been referred (for example by Health Visitors). These groups provide a vital first step into community engagement.
- **Outreach:** recently we have developed an extended model of outreach to increase engagement in our groups amongst the most vulnerable families, giving additional, tailored support to develop relationships of trust – this might mean meeting a mum for coffee before she comes along for the first time, or it might be a weekly text that encourages a parent with very little confidence to keep coming.

In 2022-23 we reached over 500 adults and children in Witney and are looking to reach even more this year. Since December 2023, we have supported:

- **Little Splashers Baby Group:** an average of 18 families per week (22 families are on our register with a waiting list in place)
- **Puddle Jumpers Ceewood Hall:** an average of 14 families per week
- **Puddle Jumpers Witney Methodist Church:** an average of 20 families per week.
- **PEEP Learning Together Groups:** We are currently running the first in the series of these 6-week programmes, focussing on baby massage to improve parent-infant attachment. This is being attended by 6 families.

The grant from Witney Town Council has significantly supported our total group work cost in Witney of £40k per year (our home visiting support is costed separately), contributing to our Group Co-Ordinator's salary, associated management, safeguarding and admin hours, volunteer training and expenses, venue hire, equipment cost and refreshments.

Over the coming months we intend to use the grant to continue to deliver the activities outlined above. Our planned buggy walks will include an easter egg hunt and visits to Witney Fire Station, Bridewell Gardens and crazy golf at the Leys. Recent visits from health visitors and the community dentist have helped families to access health assessments and services for their children – we are planning a session from the health visiting team on potty training this Spring. We plan to follow up a recent visit from Oxford Health to promote Healthy Start Vouchers and provide information on healthy eating.



We are looking forward to our summer programme, where we plan to provide two outdoor sessions per week during August, one at Burwell Recreation Ground and one at Cogges Park. These will include games, a baby area, messy play (such as sand) and crafts. We also provide a free lunch for all children. We are currently planning how to maximise the impact of our remaining PEEP learning together groups, with consideration being given to repeating our recent work in The Witney Hotel where we ran group sessions for refugee families.

The difference we make

Our groups continue to be a vital lifeline for struggling local families. The demand for our support remains at an all-time high, and we are working harder than ever to reach those most vulnerable and at-risk.

In 2022/23, of families who attended our groups:

- 100% of families felt less isolated and more confident to access the local community
- 94% of families felt they had extended their support network of like-minded parents/carers
- 100% of families reported feeling more confident in supporting their child's learning and development.

We provide families with a warm and safe space to access each week: Our groups enable families to access a warm and safe space every week free of charge, where their children are safe to play and where they can access free healthy drinks and snacks. We have provided a range of activities each week for toddlers to choose from, including regular and varied crafts, messy play, and group singing/action sessions, plus seasonal activities including a Christmas party. The groups continue to be well-attended every week by parents/carers, grandparents and children. Puddle Jumpers on Smiths Estate, launched in March 2023, has successfully filled a gap for families who did not feel able to access groups outside of the immediate area.

*"Thank you for all the support this year you have been amazing! We really do appreciate it all! ❤️"
Lone parent affected by mental health difficulties*

Families have reduced loneliness and isolation and have increased their support networks: Families attending groups meet new friends and network with other parents, and we give them confidence to share their experiences with each other. As a result, they have been forming their own support groups, regularly attending other groups with new friends and socialising with other parents outside the group environment to lessen isolation. We have run our groups every week, with just a short break at Christmas. This is in contrast to many pre-school activities which do not run during school holidays, adding to feelings of isolation and loneliness for young families. We have also seen an increasing number of grandparents attending groups while their children are working – our groups offer them a source of support and it is wonderful to see inter-generational friendships bloom.

*"It's so isolating when you have a baby and all the groups stop. Your groups have been a real lifeline."
A mum who attended our summer programme in Witney*

We have helped families access vital help and support: Home-Start Oxford provide a non-judgmental confidential approach, with our volunteers and staff being trained in safeguarding, confidentiality and advice. Families have been able to seek support with a variety of issues when they need it, either during group sessions or by communicating with our Group Co-ordinator via text during the week. We have seen an increase in parents asking for help and advice, whether for their child or a family issue, demonstrating the growth in trust of our staff and volunteers and the feeling of a safe environment.

We have successfully signposted families who attend groups. Because of our support, families are aware of and feel more able to access other services such as Early Help, Food Bank, school, family events, the library and other toddler groups.

*"Thank you for making us so welcome."
(Grandparent after first visit)*

Toddlers have increased school readiness and have improved communication skills: All children who attend our groups experience singing, talking, playing, sharing books, games and activities. They become more active learners, build their confidence to interact with other children and to play independently. Through our modelling from staff and volunteers, parents and their children are encouraged and supported to connect with one another through shared activities and experiences.

In recent months, as children and families have become more confident accessing groups since the covid pandemic, we have seen a large improvement in children participating in craft and singing, therefore improving motor skills and language through song. Many children have picked up the actions to songs and are joining in without request. Confidence in some children has improved greatly with more independent play and play alongside their peers. The newer Smiths group tends to have a lower parent participation level, but this is slowly improving, and parents are commenting on their children singing the songs at home.

*“I'm so proud of myself for coming today, and my son really came out of his shell by the end.”
Witney Mum with anxiety and depression who had never attended a group*

Improved outcomes for families with complex needs: Through the groups we have been able to identify several Mums in need of further support to whom we have then been able to offer our home visiting service on a 1-1 basis. This has helped them to move forward with various family challenges. This has long term consequences for these families and for their young children who are at the most vital stage of life for establishing life-long learning and development.

*“We've been chatting via text, but I never had the courage to come as my anxiety is really bad.
It was honestly the best choice I've made. I feel happy today.”
Mum of three new to the area, affected by mental health difficulties*

Case Study

Jan (Home-Start Oxford Group Co-Ordinator) first met mum and her two children aged 6 and 18 months at a fun day Home-Start Oxford ran in May 2023. The family had not attended any groups before, so Jan chatted with mum and invited her to go along to Puddle Jumpers.

Mum took Jan up on the offer and came to the group the following week. The baby was very overwhelmed to start with as she had only been at home before and hadn't had the opportunity to meet many children. Interacting with the other children in the group was hard for her and she tended to move from one activity to another very quickly as she also found it difficult to concentrate.

Over time however, she has really progressed and now will play alongside other children and really enjoys activities such as playing with the dolls. She will now also sit with Jen, our volunteer, and participate in the craft activities.

The most significant improvement has been her speech and language. Mum first told Jan that her child “never really speaks”. Now her favourite part of group time is the singing. She will sit on our staff members lap and has learnt to join in with all the actions and will sing along. Jan and her team have helped mum see how this is helping her child and how bringing her to group has made such a huge difference. In total contrast, mum recently told Jan “She sings all the time at home”.

Jan recently discussed with mum about her daughter's eligibility for 15 hours free nursery. Mum originally said that she thought it wasn't necessary but with encouragement from Jan, she decided to apply. Jan

sat and helped mum fill in the form. Applying online when you only have a mobile phone can be really difficult, so the use of Home-Start's Chrome Book was really helpful.

Mum now attends the group every week with her child and has formed a good support group of about five other mums who regularly attend and support each other during the week. With the help of Jan, Mum has also now accessed the local foodbank when necessary and asked for advice with outstanding bills and other issues.