

Request to Witney Town Council – Youth Services Grant June 2025

Home-Start Oxford have been supporting struggling families with children under 5 across Central and West Oxfordshire for over 36 years. We are experienced in supporting families through challenges that include mental health issues, poverty, disability, refugeehood, isolation and domestic abuse. We support families through both one-to-one home-visiting, and a raft of inclusive, nurturing groups.

Investing in the early years so every child can reach their full potential

Informed by evidence-based ‘PEEP Learning Together Programme’, our groups give babies/children a great start, vital because 90% brain development happens before age 5. Inclusive and free of charge, we proactively reach out to the most vulnerable families. Research shows that optimal brain development is dependent on stable, nurturing relationships with highly engaged adults. Children in families affected by issues such as low-income, mental health issues, disabilities and trauma in their early years are likely to have worse health and poorer educational attainment.

‘These children start school 5.5 months behind their peers in terms of a Good Level of Development at the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This gap, if unaddressed, can widen to over 21.5 months by age 16, with significant implications for long-term outcomes in education.’

(Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire West Integrated Care System Jan 2025)

The cost of a failure to invest in our youngest children and their parents is paid not only by individuals whose outcomes and happiness are compromised; it is also ruinously expensive for society. A 2021 study by the London School of Economics (LSE) estimated that insufficient early years support costs England over £16 billion annually. This figure encompasses expenses related to children's social care, crime, mental health issues, and economic inactivity among youth.

Working together with families to give children the right start in life



Little Splashers Baby Group

Our early intervention, preventative support helps create secure attachment, community connection, and learning opportunities for Witney's next generation, helping families to give their children the vital foundations they need. 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, providing opportunities for young children to play safely, to learn new skills, to enjoy healthy snacks, to interact with other children and to have fun. For parents – many of whom are struggling with the challenges of parenting – our groups can be their opportunity to see a friendly face, to enjoy a cup of tea and a chat, to learn how to play and interact with their child, to make friends and to get vital help and support when they need it. Our groups are some of the only provision accessible to ALL families in the town.

Beyond our regular group sessions, we help the most vulnerable families by providing a range of opportunities and tailored support. This includes outreach support, our new specialist group ‘Daisies’ for families of children with special educational needs (SEN) and referrals to our one-to-one home-visiting service.

Our plans for the year ahead: September 2025 - August 2026

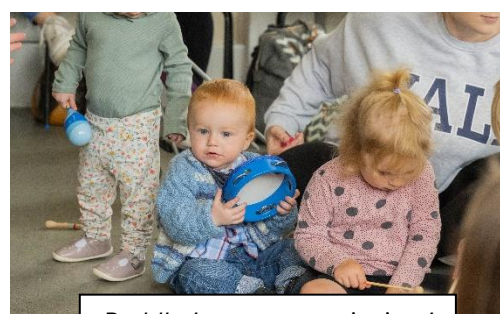
Group stay and play groups

With your support, we will continue to run our three free regular weekly groups in the centre of Witney (Witney Methodist Church) and on Smiths Estate (Ceewood Hall):

- **Little Splashers Baby Group:** weekly for under 1s at Witney Methodist Church
For babies, this group provides sensory and interactive play, sing and sign sessions with instruments and story time. It encourages interaction with parents and their babies, helping parents to understand the importance of attachment at an early age. There is a different activity within the session every week to encourage parents to try at home. Refreshments and a listening ear for parents with advice and follow up where necessary. We are always full and have a short waiting list. Parents express that this is the best hour of their week. Forming new friendships and support networks is a large part of the group's success.
- **Puddle Jumpers:** weekly for 0-5s at Witney Methodist Church
Providing sensory play, messy play, craft, free play, home corner, role play, puzzles, baby sensory play, singing and story time. We encourage school readiness through learning and interacting. Healthy snacks for children and refreshments for parents and a listening ear/advice/follow up support. Once a month our group session is an outdoor buggy walk – as well as encouraging families out into the fresh air we promote free places to visit and give opportunities to families to visit local places such as Cogges farm and the Witney fire station.
- **Puddle Jumpers:** weekly for 0-5s at Ceewood Hall, Smiths Estate
This group fills a gap in provision for families living in the most-deprived area of the town. Many families are isolated, and experience of peri-natal mental health problems, loneliness and depression are evident. A large number of single mums attend the group, and many have debt and other financial difficulties. We continue to progress this provision; this year we have introduced more sensory play activities (paint, water, play-doh), which many families do not do at home, and are increasing access to outdoor play – especially important as some children are not able to play in a garden and do not go to the park.

Outreach support

We are always listening to families; we grow and adapt our provision year-on-year in response to need. As our groups and relationships with families have grown, so have the number of families turning to us for help with significant life challenges affecting their children and family. To enable our Family Group Co-ordinator, Jan, to meet this need, we recently introduced a new post of Family Group Support Worker (Agnes). This has enabled more time for outreach support, for planning and preparing sessions and activities, and more time for development of our new groups and initiatives.



"I've been attending Home-Start groups since my son was 4 weeks old. They have been an absolute godsend. Me and my son wouldn't be where we are now without them." Witney mum

Supporting children and families with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Last year we observed an increase in children with special educational needs (SEN) accessing our groups, and, through our close partnership with health visitors who emphasised the ever-increasing need and lack of provision, we identified a gap.

- **Daisies:** our recently-launched referral only group, provides specialist support and play for families of children 0-5 with SEN (diagnosed and undiagnosed). This takes place on Wednesday afternoons at Witney Methodist Church. Our staff have invested time visiting groups in other areas, researching and purchasing new equipment to ensure the group provides the right support. We look forward to seeing this group grow and flourish over the next year. We have also adapted our existing groups to ensure a warm, welcoming and safe environment for everyone.

“I was contacted by a Housing Officer about a Mum of three children, recently been made a single parent and struggling as her two older children have autism spectrum disorder (ASD). I texted Mum to invite the family to Puddle Jumpers. She replied to say that ‘her middle son has autism, so they don’t attend groups’. I replied to reassure her that our group is very welcoming to all, and that we have staff and volunteers to help with the children.

“Mum attended the group for the first time with her son and younger daughter. It was a really positive experience for Mum and the children. They have continued to attend. The 2-year-old girl does not get the opportunity to attend groups elsewhere due to her brothers’ ASD, school-runs and other commitments. She has made progress already with attachment and confidence.

“We have made some changes within the group to cater for the needs of her son – a quiet space when he gets overwhelmed, numbers and puzzles, the room lay out to reduce the chance of eating ‘messy play’ tray items. Mum has been able to chat to others and shared some of her anxieties and worries about school and her home life. She has really benefited from this safe space for her and her children.”

Jan, Family Group Co-ordinator

Year-round provision and exciting new experiences

Many families of young children find themselves feeling more isolated in school holidays. We continue to run our groups through half-terms and Easter holidays, and, over the Summer, we provide a series of fun days in outdoor spaces in Witney, each with a different theme, from beach party to sports day! These ensure that young children and their families have access to activities, healthy food and support over crucial weeks when other sources of support are often not available.

This year we have secured funding to run a summer trip for the first time! We are excited to take our families on a day-trip to Beale Park, where we will provide coach travel, entry fees, activities, healthy lunches and snacks, and even sun-hats and sun-cream! This will be the first time some of the children will have experienced an outing like this.



The difference we make

Our inclusive, accessible and non-judgemental approach to working with children and families is key to the positive change we see. Families feel safe, welcome and included. Consistency in staff and volunteers enables both children and parents to establish strong and trusted relationships, enabling them to have the confidence to seek the support they need.

Last year we carried out several termly 'snapshot' surveys at our Witney groups. Of those who responded:

- 100% reported feeling more confident in supporting their child's learning and development
- 97% felt they had extended their support network of like-minded parents/carers
- 90% felt more confident to access the local community.

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 form their own support groups, regularly attending other groups with new friends and socialising with other parents outside the group environment to lessen isolation. This is especially important to the many families who do not have a family support network of their own nearby, and our outreach work helps to ensure more vulnerable families know about Home-Start Oxford and feel confident to attend.

"Last week, one of the mums asked if we could celebrate her son's first birthday with our group, as they have no family or friends nearby (the family immigrated and have English as an additional language). Today, she brought in a cake, balloons, a birthday card for us to sign, biscuits, and party bag toys for the children. Her little boy arrived dressed smartly for the special occasion. Mum was very grateful for this opportunity, and it made us realise the important role we play in the lives of some of our families."
Jan, Family Group Co-ordinator

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. We have a programme of enhanced training which offers courses in topics such as parent-infant relationships, domestic abuse and SEN. 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 regularly signpost 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.

"Mum came to group very distressed - she asked for help with an eviction notice from her Housing Association. We sat on the phone together with CAB and worked through the forms needed to complete. Mum is pregnant and also has a child recently diagnosed with skin cancer. We spent 45 minutes together talking and sorting out her issues." Jan, Family Group Co-ordinator

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. Children have access to activities many do not have at home, such as messy play, sensory play and outdoor play. 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.

"I really enjoyed today, it is always great to see the children playing and the carers relaxing, and to be helping with that." Group Volunteer

Improved outcomes for families with complex needs: Our groups offer opportunities for connection with vulnerable families – as well as offering support with needs at group, for those who need more intense support we can refer to our one-to-one home-visiting service. Our groups also offer continued support to families reaching the end of their one-to-one support, thus providing ongoing care. Our support with various family challenges 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.

"This is our favourite day of the week - we love coming." Witney Mum, Little Splashers

Reducing inequalities: Our expertise in early years is recognised and highly valued in Oxfordshire: we are at the heart of work to reduce inequalities and play a leading role on cross-sector work for our own charity and the wider VCS sector. We are a leading partner in Oxfordshire for the Marmot Place initiative to reduce health inequalities: with one of the three priorities to 'give every child the best start in life'. We have been selected for our reach to families facing greatest inequalities and to bring the experience of those families to the fore to shape change. We are feeding into the call for evidence and will be a key partner in upcoming Marmot events.

"An amazing service, valued by families and providing great support." NHS Infant-Parent-Perinatal Service

Witney Town Council's continued support is vital

Witney residents now receive the greatest amount of group provision and support from Home-Start Oxford across the county. The demand for our support remains at an all-time high, and we are dedicating more resources than ever to reach those most vulnerable and at-risk. With costs continuing to rise and higher levels of funding uncertainty, we rely on the support of local funders to continue our work. Families have fewer places to turn for face-to-face support; Home-Start Oxford offer a vital lifeline.

The continued support of Witney Town Council has been fundamental. As a small charity we have successfully bought further funding into the town through securing grants from national funders such as Children in Need – however local funding is vital for the continued provision of our work. We still have a significant funding gap for 25-26 and a larger gap for 26-27.



Family Case Study: Now I love being a mum, it's who I am

"It was when my eldest was around 4 weeks old when I first went to the doctors thinking I wasn't a good enough mum. I couldn't look after him, I just felt really low and depressed about everything. You can't prepare for being a mum. I had no family support and I was just struggling.

I'd felt excited about being a mum but I was so worried about if I was doing the right thing, because I didn't have a mum figure myself. The way I was brought up was not the way you should be brought up as a child. I thought because of my background I wouldn't be able to bring a child up and I'd be judged. And I've struggled with depression since I was 16 and now I was feeling really low, no energy to do anything, no motivation, I just felt like I couldn't do it.



My health visitor suggested going to Little Splashers, one of the Home-Start baby groups. When I was there I met Jan who runs the group. She was so friendly, she made it easy to tell her what I was struggling with. Jan arranged for me to meet with their Family Coordinator, who told me they had a volunteer for me.

When Robin visited we just chatted at my house. I remember she told me to have a little rest and have a hot drink while she played with my son. Most of the time to begin with we just stayed at home because I couldn't go out. In my head I thought all my child was going to do was cry if we were out, so I wouldn't go out for long with him. Robin was like come on let's go for a walk, let's just get out, get some fresh air. I just didn't have the confidence then. I was petrified that something was going to happen to him and he was going to get germs. I needed to get home. It was all in my head. Robin taught me that no it wasn't scary outside, and that it's good for your mental health. She was next to me and I knew we were going to be ok.

And I feel like my eldest became happier, just by going out instead of staring at four walls. Just going to the park, I wouldn't have done that by myself. Or speaking to other people. I wouldn't have said good morning to anyone because I thought I'd be judged. Now we're out every day. We have our regular route. We see people all the time and they know me and they know the little ones and they always speak to them. And sleep... my eldest was a terrible sleeper from the word go. We had to sleep train him and that was all through Home-Start. They arranged for a sleep trainer and it was great. He's gone from waking every hour to now he sleeps 12 hours a night, all because of Home-Start!

I feel I'm so much more confident with my second child. I now go to the Home-Start groups every week with my newborn while my eldest is at nursery to get him socialising with other little ones and to get me out as well so it's great to have some one-on-one time with my youngest. I definitely wouldn't have done that with my eldest.

Looking back, I think if I hadn't have had Home-Start support maybe I would be on tablets to boost my mood and I reckon my toddler would still be in my bed and yeah I just feel it would have been completely different. The support has given the kids a different mum. At the start I didn't feel like I was good enough but now I know I'm a good mum and I love being a mum. It's who I am."

Thank you for considering our application.