



Thank you for changing lives

Report to Witney Town Council July 2026

Home-Start Oxford have been supporting struggling families with children under 5 across Central and West Oxfordshire for over 37 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.

We have had another busy and successful year, thanks to the support of Witney Town Council, one of our most valued funders. We have seen some exciting developments in our group and outreach work, enabling us to meet the needs of the many families with children under 5 living in Witney.

We are pleased to report on the impact of our work over the past year, and look forward to continuing our partnership to support many more families in the year ahead.

With your help, we have helped children 0-5 in Witney to thrive through our group support and outreach work



“We know that the 1,001 days from pregnancy to age 2 set the foundations for an individual’s cognitive, emotional and physical development.”

(Department of Health and Social Care, April 2026)

This is why Home-Start Oxford’s work in Witney is so important: by providing inclusive, nurturing groups and early support for families facing isolation, low confidence and other challenges, we help strengthen parent-child relationships, improve wellbeing and give children the best possible start in life.



This year, we delivered:

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. 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. 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 have supported families with a range of needs, for example, one Mum who recently moved to the UK has limited English and was worried about the impact on her child's progress. Mum practices her English at group and all the parents talk to her to help her practice. Our staff and volunteers have reassured and supported her each week.

At all these groups we provide healthy snacks for children and a welcome cup of tea for parents/carers. Our increased investment in staff has allowed us more planning and creative time, meaning that this year we have been able to offer more craft, messy-play, sensory and themed activities for children.

"You know when you did the tuff tray with rice the other week? I did a tray like that for N at home, and he loved it! He added cars to it, and played for a long time with it! Thanks for the idea!"

Mum from Puddle Jumpers Ceewood Hall



A range of activities helping children learn, explore and create



Beyond our regular group sessions, we help the most vulnerable families by providing a range of opportunities and tailored support. This includes outreach support, and our new specialist group 'Daisies' for families of children with special educational needs (SEN). We are particularly proud of how this work has developed this year, supporting those children and families who most need support.

- **Outreach support**

We are always listening to families; we grow and adapt our provision year-on-year in response to need. This year our Group Coordinator Jan has provided more one-to-one outreach support, and we have referred families in to our volunteer home-visiting support.

- **Supporting children and families with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

Last year, in response to ever-increasing need and lack of provision for children with SEN, we established 'Daisies', a referral only group providing 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. The response has been incredible, and we have seen really exciting developments for children who attend over the past year.

"He never plays like this with anyone else. Usually, he's quite shy because other children his age speak better than he does, so he tends to stay with me. But here, because they've been attending the group together for so long, he feels safe enough to talk and play."

Mum of two boys with SEN

"The room is perfect - welcoming and calm, and you are spot on with the resources you have provided. It's so lovely seeing the children's smiles, we wish you could do this everywhere! It will be so good to be able to signpost to this group and collaborate with training and other resources available."

Bethan Boddy, Lead for SEND in Oxford on her visit to Daisies

- **Year-round provision and exciting new experiences**

We continued to run our groups through half-terms and Easter holidays, and, over the Summer, we provided a series of fun days in outdoor spaces in Witney, each with a different theme. We also attended OPA play days to provide activities for the youngest children. We provided lunches and healthy snacks to ensure that young children and their families (including older siblings) have access to activities, healthy food and support over these crucial weeks.

This year, with additional funding secured through the Lottery and Cash for Kids, we were able to run a day trip for the first time. We took families to Beale Park completely free of charge, including coach travel, lunch, refreshments, and even sun cream! This opened up opportunities to young children who might otherwise not have such opportunities, and a wonderful day was had by all.

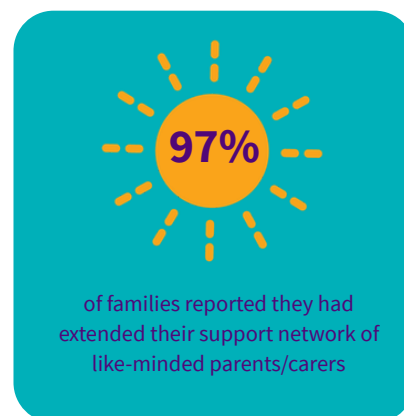
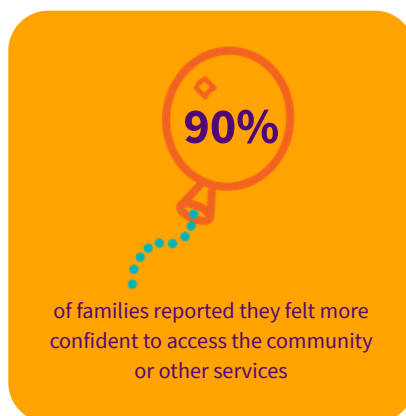
"This is the first time I've come here and I just wanted to say thank you so much for organising the trip. I've loved seeing the kids running around, they're just so happy, it's so nice."

Mum



Impact

Last year (1st April 2025-31st March 2026) we supported approximately **300 families in Witney** through our group work and summer activity programme. We carried out several termly 'snapshot' surveys at our Witney groups. Of those who responded:



Toddlers have increased school readiness and have improved communication skills

Children have opportunities to socialise, learn skills and experience play, reading and a range of exciting activities. As parents gain confidence to play with and respond to their children, we see children's confidence and enjoyment grow too. At group, children are visibly joyful, enjoying singing, story time and activities they may not be able to access elsewhere. For example, Chloe* aged 1 spends most of her day at home on the sofa with mum and dad; when a neighbour brings her to group, she laughs and smiles with other babies and adults, loves signing and shows clear enjoyment in the social environment.

We regularly work with young children with complex needs affected by issues including attachment difficulties, delayed speech and language, and, in some cases, significant risk of harm. We see children make important progress in communication, confidence and engagement. For example, one 18-month-old child first came to group with no words and no interest in joining activities; a few months later, they were speaking in sentences and participating happily.

"I found out about Home-Start from my social worker when I asked her about baby groups in my area that would help my son, who we suspect has autism. It's given him a chance to see people talk, to watch them interact and things like that. I've seen so many changes since we started to come here. My son now talks a lot more, and his words are clearer. He also now plays with other children which is great to see."

Mum



Families have reduced loneliness and isolation and have increased their support networks

Families attending groups meet new friends, connect with other parents and gain confidence to share their experiences. As a result, they build support networks that often continue beyond the group itself, improving community connection, reducing isolation and strengthening mental health. This is especially important for families without relatives nearby, and our outreach work helps more vulnerable families know about Home-Start Oxford and feel confident to attend.

"I've got so much out of coming to this group. Home-Start is my village. It's helped me enormously. It's made me a better person and a better parent and I'm so appreciative of that. I'm more confident and my kids have blossomed. It's just so nice to see. And because of this group I've also made friends. This is not just a little play group, it's made a big difference to me and my family."

Mum



Families access vital help and support

Home-Start Oxford provides a non-judgmental, confidential approach, with volunteers and staff trained in safeguarding, confidentiality and advice. Families are able to seek help with a wide variety of issues during sessions and between groups through contact with our Group Co-ordinator. Because of this trusted support, families are more aware of and more confident in accessing other services such as Early Help, the Food Bank, schools, family events, libraries and other toddler groups.

Improved outcomes for families with complex needs

Our groups create a vital point of connection for vulnerable families. As well as offering support within group, they help us identify when families need more intensive support and enable referral into our one-to-one home-visiting service. They also provide continued support for families coming to the end of one-to-one help, creating a more joined-up pathway of care with long-term benefits for parents and for children at a crucial stage of development.

"I look forward to going to group each week. It's the only place that feels so comfortable. Home-Start groups are much more than 'just' a group, they're like a home to me."

Mum

Reducing inequalities

Our expertise in early years is recognised and highly valued in Oxfordshire and beyond. We continue to inform policy developments as an expert leader in the early years forum, working with The Royal Foundation for Early Childhood Development, and as a leading partner for both the Oxfordshire Marmot Place initiative to reduce health inequalities (with one of the three priorities to 'give every child the best start in life'), and the Oxfordshire Early Years Network.



Celebrating success

This year, we were honoured to welcome **HRH The Princess of Wales** for a special visit to see first-hand how we are supporting families in Oxfordshire. Families who attend our Puddle Jumpers group in Witney joined our session in Rose Hill and loved meeting the Princess.



We are incredibly proud to share that Home-Start Oxford was recently named a finalist in the **Oxfordshire Business Awards (OXBA)** for the *Charity & Community Award* – a recognition that means so much to our whole team, our volunteers and the families we support.



Attending the awards evening was a truly memorable experience. The room was filled with inspiring charities, organisations and businesses from across the county, all working tirelessly to make Oxfordshire a better place. The atmosphere was full of energy and celebration, and it was a privilege to stand alongside so many remarkable groups who share our commitment to community support.



Although we didn't take home the award this time, being shortlisted and named a finalist is an achievement we are deeply proud of. It reflects the dedication, passion and hard work of our staff, volunteers and trustees, and it acknowledges the impact we strive to make every day. For a small charity, this recognition is a powerful reminder that our work matters, and that the support we provide to families is valued across the county.



Sam's story.....Home-Start groups are like a home to me



My health visitor recommended that I try out the Home-Start groups after I had my son EJ. At the time I'd only just moved into the area and I didn't know anyone there. My anxiety took over. I went three times and could see the group through the window but just couldn't pluck up the courage to go in, so I'd turn round and go home again. Then on the fourth time, Jan, Home-Start's Group Coordinator saw me outside and encouraged me to go in, which I did. Everyone was just so welcoming.

From then on I went every week until EJ started preschool. Then I had my youngest son Enzo. I remember I had him on the Friday and I attended group again on the Monday! I now go to two Home-Start groups a week and they're amazing.

I don't have a lot of people around me that are my own age or have children and it's the same for my kids. I think it's so crucial for their development to be around other children, which they get at groups. I've seen the difference between EJ and his siblings who didn't come to groups. My older daughter was a lockdown baby and she's very withdrawn. She finds it hard to get into school and is shy, whereas EJ is very outgoing. I remember within just a few weeks at groups, EJ had got to know who the staff were, who the children were, and he was really happy to go off and play and to be there. He's really confident and when he sees anyone he knows, like when he sees Jan in the street, he'll run over and give her a big cuddle and I 100% think that's because of groups.

I also love how the groups involve the children in everything regardless of age. So even Enzo, as a newborn, he could be awake but not totally alert but they'd still involve him in the singing and all that sort of stuff and I find that's a key point. Some people might say well the baby's not old enough so they're just left with the mum, when actually it's quite nice for somebody to involve your baby or give you a break and do singing time with them. They're still getting experiences from that. They're still seeing new things and hearing new things. I think it's great for them.

The groups have also been somewhere I can ask for help if we need it. When me and my partner were struggling financially – I was on maternity leave and we weren't entitled to social funds because of my partner's visa restrictions – Jan pointed me in the right direction and helped me sort it all out. There's been times when we've had to use the food bank and Jan's done the referral forms for us. And when two years ago I was having chemo after they found I had a brain tumour, Jan did things like get us shopping vouchers so we could get fresh food for the children, and yeah, just helped us a lot. That was obviously a tough time and if I hadn't have had the group, which was just brilliant, I think mentally I would have really suffered. The group was a place I could go where I was treated normally, not like I had something wrong. I didn't want to be asked every day if I was ok, if I was this or that, when I'm living with it. It was just really important to me that I could be treated normally to be honest, and I got that from the group.



Home-Start groups are much more than 'just' a group, they're like a home to me to be honest. I feel comfortable there. Everyone is relaxed and friendly, everyone watches out for each other. You don't feel awkward going to the group or asking for advice. Sometimes when you think you're failing at something, actually you're not, you just need a bit of reassurance and the other mums and the Home-Start team are really good at doing that, giving you that reassurance that you are doing a good job.

Even though I'm back at work, I make sure I don't take a shift on a Monday or Wednesday morning which is when the groups run, because I feel that strongly that the groups are so important for the kids. And it's important for me too. They're something I look forward to going to each week. It's the place I go to socialise with other parents and it's the only place that feels so comfortable. The groups really do mean so much to me.



**THANK YOU
SO MUCH**

