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Report to Witney Town Council – Youth Grant Fund March 2022

OUR SERVICE

We are delighted to have been able to resume in-person groups for children and families, in this second year of valued funding from Witney Town Council.

Since September 2021 we have offered 58 groups sessions to families in Witney reaching 178 children and 165 parents.

There has been huge take-up by local families and referrers including Health Visitors. We have temporarily extended the hours of our Family Group Coordinator to offer more sessions. Our goal is to sustain this extended support, to mitigate the impact of covid for the youngest and most vulnerable children.

A unique feature of Home-Start is the considerable time and skills of our trained volunteers. Groups in Witney are supported by 6 volunteers. Their average contribution of 12 hours per week to our service is worth over £6,000 to the project each year.

In addition, across central and West Oxfordshire, our team of c. 40 trained volunteers provide home-visiting support to local families, struggling with difficulties including mental health, poverty, isolation, anxiety or ill health. This is invaluable in helping us reach those who are most isolated and vulnerable.

This considerable in-kind contribution helps us maintain an extremely cost-effective service.

LITTLE SPLASHERS – Baby group for under 1's

From October 2021 we were thrilled to restart this group in person at Witney Methodist Church. Little Splashers is a warm and friendly space where parents and babies enjoy stories, singing, Sing and Sign, baby massage techniques, developmental play and parents share experiences and tips. Like all our groups, Little Splashers deploys PEEP activities to support children's development, attachment and happiness. This group takes place in person currently with a booking system for 15 spaces (due to Covid) and will open to 20-25 later this year. Through this group we also offer some 1-1 support for parents experiencing challenges. We are supporting 39 families, with changing weekly attendance, through this group.

One of supported families who suffered with post-natal depression has recently spoken on camera about her experience of attending our Little Splashers Group;

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Families are supported to join the group with a phone call from the Family Group Co-Ordinator prior to joining. Due to the nature of the group, parents and babies move on to Puddle Jumpers once they are one which creates a space for new families to join and increase our reach to families.

“Everyone at the group is just so lovely and I know I speak on behalf of all of us that go, without the Home-Start group, I don't know, I think it's really helped a lot of us get through motherhood. It's our favourite day of the week Tuesday!”

PUDDLE JUMPERS – parent and toddler group for 0-5's

From November 2021 we were thrilled to restart this group in person at Witney Methodist Church, for children over 1. We are over-subscribed and ideally would like to be able to run another session to meet the high demand (a current challenge is limited availability of space at our venue).

Average attendance weekly is 36 (total number of adults and children). Since November we have reached 185 parents and children.

We have started a book swap with donated books. This encourages early reading and interest in books with no cost involved.

“It's just nice to do something different like reading with her, and children's books are quite expensive. And there's only so many times you want to read the same one! Also, because some of them are donated is quite nice, because they're from my generation. Like, there was a really nice Shirley Hughes one that I took home to read to my daughter.”

BUGGY WALKS & OUTDOOR GROUPS

We've continued the buggy walks we started during Covid restrictions, now running on the 4th Wednesday each month. Due to the weather this has been a small group but is popular with parents.

In January 2022 we started a new buggy walk on the Smith's Estate, Witney. We took the step to extend our provision to this estate, having experienced low attendance at the Methodist Church from Smiths Estate families, who we were keen to reach. We were mindful of the greater levels of isolation and potential exclusion due to financial or confidence barriers, faced by local mums and babies. The first walk was attended by 5 Mums, and we hope this will help to build our relationship with local families and support them to access our new stay and play provision starting in April 2022.

The buggy walks provide a non-threatening way to meet new parents without walking into a new group setting. They are hugely beneficial to mental wellbeing, combining connection with other people, physical activity for parents and children and mindfulness – 3 of the NHS 5 steps to Mental Wellbeing. We often end the walk at a park or a setting for coffee and socializing. We aim to include a year-round outdoor element to our service, to support health and wellbeing.

Bridewell Gardens (Wilcote) have organised two visits for our family groups planned for late March and May 2022. They will provide the opportunity of experiencing the gardens and the wellbeing opportunities that this will offer.

Through our connections with Cogges Farm they have offered 5 of our families a 6-week group to attend the farm and cook together.

PEEP GROUPS (BY INVITATION)

We restarted these targeted group sessions, for families who are the most isolated, in January 2022, and have quickly had referrals to fill the sessions three times over.

The content is designed to support children's learning from birth, addressing the disadvantage gap in education and alarming increase in children who are deemed not to be 'school ready'.

We have started these new sessions in Ceewood Hall on the Smith's Estate, where need is high.

The small group setting encourages parents who have experienced anxiety and lack of socialization due to Covid. The children are also introduced to a play setting that is calm, safe and nurturing. Content is based on the evidence-based PEEP Learning Together programme.

We are really pleased to be reaching younger parents through this group, and find that we are successful achieving engagement with parents who may be low in confidence, through investment in relationship building outside the sessions and building a group who have shared experiences and challenges. These comments from parents evidence the need:

“This is the first time I've been out since I had my son and he's 6 months. My daughter has really suffered as she only goes out if my Mum can take her and she's 2.5 years old and due to start nursery.” (Mum had PND).

“I’ve pulled my 2 year old out of nursery as I am too anxious about Covid so I’ve kept her at home. I haven’t been to any groups with my son who is 5 months.” (Mum has anxiety – 10 marked on the questionnaire).

“H seems happy at home with me – we’ve just got used to it.” (H is 22 months and is delayed in his speech and social skills).

“It’s really hard for me to get out with my two boys as I have a disability and it takes me 20 minutes to walk of the entrance to the estate to get the bus. I don’t really know any other local Mums.” (8 marked on the questionnaire for anxiety).

Through our community connections with Windrush Primary school we identified a need for work with parents on the Windrush Estate where our second Peep group started at the beginning of March in the school’s community room.

This work is specifically funded by BBC Children in Need.

Sarah and Emily’s* story

Sarah came to our recent Peep group on the Smith’s Estate. It was a small group of 8 Mums referred to us through the Health Visitor. All Mums were suffering with social anxiety, PND, post-covid anxiety and found parent groups too overwhelming. None had attended any groups previously.

Sarah attended the first week and opened about her struggles with Emily. She had just started the pathway for Emily to be assessed for autism and found group environments with Emily quite challenging both due to Emily’s behaviour and parental judgement.

Sarah and Emily were made to feel totally welcomed and included in the Peep group sessions. Our volunteer engaged with the children giving the parents a chance to discuss their experiences and share ideas.

Emily thrived in this small group environment where the area was safe and there were no ‘no go zones’ which enabled Sarah to relax (with encouragement).

During the 6 weeks we were together relationships with other mums were built and check ins made during the week. Building these support networks for Mums is so important so that they can share their anxieties and give each other support throughout the week and moving forward in their children’s lives.

Since finishing the group Sarah and Emily, along with the other Mum she came with, have started coming to our stay and play group which they have both really enjoyed and continue to attend. Sarah is regularly supported by text as she continues the process with Emily and addresses housing issues and her own Mum’s terminal illness.

We invited Sarah and Emily to go to our new initiative with Cogges Farm offering 6 weeks of sessions for a small group of mums who would not have attended the farm due to various barriers. We went for a tour the first week and Sarah found it quite a challenging experience with the space available – animals, farm kitchen, garden, playground. She said she ‘found it really hard work’ and didn’t think Emily would ‘ever do any of the cooking’. The photos tell a different story.....

*Names have been changed.



ONLINE

Our online provision during the hardest times of the pandemic offered a lifeline to families. Since restrictions have eased, we've seen the interest drop, with an evident preference for face-to-face interactions and group. We've therefore drawn this part of our pandemic-response to a close.

We continue to provide support and signposting to a wider community of volunteers and young families through our Facebook, social media platforms and regular email newsletters.

NEW GROUPS FOR 2022/3

We plan to launch a new stay and play group on or near the Smith's Estate in April 2022. The Health Visiting team are backing this new group provision and would like to attend monthly to weigh babies and provide children's development checks. There is currently no provision on the Smith's Estate, Deer Park and Kingfisher Estate for a free stay and play group for parents/carers and children. Public transport costs from these areas into the town centre is expensive. Many of these families are on a low-income and facing financial difficulties.

We are working with Mums who have experienced a number of different challenges including domestic abuse, ex-partner in prison, single parents, child bereavement, social isolation, mental health issues, and PND.

We have been working with Kerry Harris, Community Builder WODC and Harvest@Home to provide a community garden/growing space on the Smith's Estate. Previously there has been planters made and planted up but this has been left to be overgrown. Home-Start would welcome this as a space where families could garden with their children and learn about growing vegetables. Harvest@Home can also provide picking, cooking and eating sessions for the families which we hope would be an aim for later in the year.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

We value our partnerships with:

- West Oxfordshire District Council

- Waitrose & John Lewis
- Witney Fridge
- Witney Baby Bank
- Councillors Andrew Coles, Joy Aitman and Rosa Bolger
- Health Visiting Team
- Aspire
- Library
- Ceewood Hall, Davenport Road Methodist Church, Witney Methodist Church
- Part and Parcel Caffeine and Cake
- Cogges Farm
- Bridewell Gardens

At a strategic level, our Chief Executive is an active member of the West Oxfordshire Voluntary Sector Development Group, representing the Early Years. We also co-founded and co-Chair the Oxfordshire Early Years Network, to provide peer support and leadership to community and voluntary sector groups in this under-resourced sector. We are concerned that there are a shortage and lack of visibility of such groups, who were forced to close during Covid due to vulnerabilities of volunteers or closure of venues, and that this risks being an ongoing deprivation for families who need free or low cost community provision.

Financial update

We are on course to fully spend the grant, which is contributing to our Family Group Coordinator's salary plus support and supervision, volunteer costs, venue costs and consumables.

Thank you for this valuable funding which is helping us provide the stimulation, development opportunities and parental support that will help the youngest children in Witney to thrive.

Your help to promote our work in the town, and connect vulnerable families to our support, is always welcome. Jan Chrystal is our Family Group Coordinator and can be reached on 07590 863 095 / jan@homestartoxford.org.uk, or families connected via Facebook – Home Start Oxford in Witney & West Oxfordshire