
Final Summary Evaluation Report

“The Here Together Project”

(Supported by The National Lottery Community
Fund)

For

HERe NI

Submitted By

Quaesitum

Independent Evaluation and Research

*10 Rocks Chapel Road
Crossgar
Downpatrick
BT30 9BA
02844832672
07588661778*

P McCorry BSSc Hons PGC Appl Soc Res

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4.0 Outcomes & Impact

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents a summary of the impact and outcomes of the service based on feedback gathered internally and complemented by the independent elicitation of views of service recipients. The Consultant attended meetups and carried out face to face interviews with parents and children and young people. Some interviews were also conducted by telephone e.g. Foyle group. All those consulted said their expectations had not only been met but had been surpassed. All those who provided feedback were assured that their views would be anonymised and treated in confidence.

4.2 Happier Children & Young People

Children and young people said that they enjoyed coming and looked forward to the activities. In particular, they referred to the arts and crafts, the cookery, the outdoor activities and the conservation with plants and bird boxes. They liked meeting their friends and playing with them. They said it made them happier to be around children the same age from similar families. One child explained:

'I look forward to coming. I like to see my friends and I like all the activities we do. I always feel happier after coming. You can play with your friends and have fun.'

All the children consulted said that they have fun doing the activities and that they love sharing the time with other families like their own. Some referred to enjoying Pride and specifically to: making bird boxes, the arts and crafts, making things at Halloween and Christmas. Others referred to just wanting to come and relax. One child explained:

'I really like coming. It makes me happier. I would be bored at home doing nothing. We do fun activities and my mummy enjoys it as well.'

Another said:

'I feel happy coming. I love coming with mummy. I have friends here who have two mummies like me. I used to always be asking why am I the only one with two mummies so now I can see most people have a mum and a dad, some are adopted, some have two mummies, some have two daddies.'

Children enjoyed feeling included, having fun together and, in particular, many commented on how welcoming everyone is, especially to newcomers. One child said:

'You make friends with everyone, your own age and different ages. We have similar interests and very different interests but we are all the same. I like that very much. It makes me feel very happy that my friends are just like me. It is very nice to be with people just like me.'

Another parent said that she felt her son was less likely to have a meltdown because he enjoyed being able to come to all the activities. She described how he had been unwell and therefore unable to come and that he was very sad because he couldn't come. Parents generally liked the opportunity for their children to be surrounded by other LGBTQIA+ families and to see their family as 'normal.' They welcomed the fact that their children could interact with like-minded children. Some parents felt that the activities could be more age appropriate, in particular, for the older children. In response, numerous activities were offered out to older children but they didn't turn up. That said, irrespective of age difference, the fact that they can come together is, in itself, a great support and many highlighted the importance of this. One parent said:

'It is such a great support for us as a family. No one ever slips up with the children like in other groups where they might say is your dad picking you up.. I don't have a dad I've two mummies and a donor...as the children get older this is becoming their support. As well as the children, we as parents are still getting so much comfort and support.'

4.3 More Confident Children & Young People

There were numerous examples of increased confidence where children and young people were happy to stand up for themselves using the appropriate measured language they have learnt from taking part in the Project. As highlighted above, the Project is client led so the activities and events are all chosen and agreed by the participants. This, in itself, presents a very positive environment where children and young people's opinions are valued and nurtured thereby raising self-confidence and self-esteem. This is particularly manifest in the Steering Group. For many children and young people, this is the first time anyone has asked them for their opinion and, equally importantly, listened to their opinion. Children generally said they feel more confident when they are surrounded by families like their own. They explained that they are confident because they are with people who use kind language and they are in a room where they can explore their feelings and their worries and concerns. This confidence helps them in school as one child described:

'I think you learn to control yourself better. There are other families just like mine. Pretty much none of my class have gay parents. I know and understand now that every family is unique and this helps me to be more confident when I am in school.'

One child related how she had been asked by another child in school: *'but who is your real mummy? You grow in your mummy's tummy.'* Since coming to the group she had gained

sufficient confidence to explain that she has two mummies. This confidence is drawn chiefly from the *'support, the understanding and the friendship'* all of which her mother explained are experienced by parents and children alike.

Another child explained that coming to the group and taking part in the activities helped her with her worries. This particular child had been very upset by her Brownie Leader who had given her a receipt to take home to her 'mum or dad' and when she explained she had two mummies the Leader said *'Well that's just weird.'* As a consequence, the child wouldn't go back to Brownies. Her mother explained the positive impact of being able to come to the group in the aftermath of the incident:

'She was very upset and refused to go back to Brownies. She asked me if we could go every week to the activities as she loved them so much. Coming has really helped her mental health. Two mummies can be hard when you are surrounded by heterosexual families. When she comes here she can talk to the other girls.'

One parent said that she had observed her son to be more outgoing since coming to the activities:

'The main advantage is that the children have the opportunity to be surrounded by other children and given their own space to grow together. You can see them becoming more able and more confident because they have the space to do so.'

Another parent explained that she felt that, as the children get older they will need the support more. She described how the children are more insulated from hatred, cruelty and discrimination and this is likely to change in the future. At the minute they are not experiencing cruelty or unkindness from their friends. They are finding it 'cool' and they have lots of lovely things to do and living in a relatively unchallenged world. She explained how 'normal' life feels being a part of the group:

'I asked my daughter what she thought all the mummies had in common and she said well they mostly have long hair? they talk a lot? they are vegetarian?'

One child who took part in the Project was getting abuse in school about her family and being called 'gay'. She told her mummies who went to the school to explain what was happening. As a result, the teacher asked the child if she would like to have the opportunity to tell the class about her family. She had the confidence to stand up in front of the class and explain that she was adopted, her mummies had chosen her, she had two mummies and that did not mean that she was gay. She explained.... my granny isn't gay and she gave birth to my mummy. That's a really stupid thing to say... At one point she was asked a question and she, again, had the confidence to say..I'm not comfortable answering that.

Another child participating in the Project was asked by a classmate.. *who does all your washing if you don't have a mummy?* She replied looking at her as if she was mad.. *but I have two daddies to do that.'*

4.4. More Confident Parents

There is significant evidence that confidence and self-esteem have grown not only among the children and young people but also among their parents. Many of those interviewed indicated that they were more confident about their family and, in particular about tackling challenge in everyday life. Group participation appears to be particularly successful in building confidence as one parent explained:

'I find the group keeps us all together as friends both the parents and the children. We have lifelong friends through this group, and this keeps us all more confident in handling all sorts of issues which come up.'

Many parents interviewed believe the increased confidence comes from being part of the group:

'It is great having people around you that you can talk to about same sex parenting. No one really understands unless you are in the same set up. It gives you empowerment and confidence to navigate the highs and the lows.'

It is clear that being a part of the group and taking part in activities together is helping to build confidence which transfers into wider society as one parent described:

'I feel much more confident as a result of taking part in this project and I feel I can take it out into the world. We are not strange. We are not weird and the group has been instrumental in this new confidence.'

More specifically, the independent evaluation process has found evidence that the Project has significantly increased confidence to be more open about being an LGBTQIA+ family. One parent explained the impact as follows:

'I feel so much more confident now. There is nothing different about our wee family. Before we took part, we were very private and we didn't really even say to our families. We had no interaction with other families like ours. I used to refer to 'my partner' now I'm confident enough to say: 'my wife.'

4.5 New Skills Acquired

The skills acquired include a range of arts and crafts, making banners and badges and playing new board games. More specifically, they have learnt about mindfulness and meditation, First Aid, origami, golf, clay making, cooking, planting, badge making, a variety of arts and crafts,

Online safety and how to play the ukelele. They have had emotional and practical support which has helped them to become more resilient. They have also learnt about their identity and the significance of 'Pride.' This combination of learning and support has also enhanced confidence. In particular, involvement in the Steering Group has provided the children and young people with a wide range of skills e.g. how to debate issues, the importance of listening to the views of others, the formulation and presentation of ideas, how to plan activities, how to provide feedback on activities, how to suggest new things to do, the importance of respecting the views and feelings of others. These are vital life skills to acquire and will be useful as the children and young people grow older and enter the world of work. Through all aspects of the Project they are well prepared to take their place in society.

4.6 Reduced Isolation

It must be noted that the Project was initially delivered during COVID. There is no doubt that the Project reduced isolation at a time when people were more socially isolated than ever due to the pandemic. All those consulted during the evaluation referred to the benefits of being able to sit with other likeminded people albeit remotely. At this difficult time, the Project engendered a strong sense of community which gave participants strength to cope with their isolation and loneliness. The children and young people looked forward to the online activities and to receiving their packages in the post. All of this helped them to feel connected because someone was caring about them and interacting with them at a very lonely time.

Prior to joining the Project, many participants referred to feeling isolated and lonely. One parent highlighted this:

'We were really feeling quite lonely. It is a fact that in other parent support groups such as Surestart you can't really talk about LGBT issues. You are constantly having to come out and explain yourself.'

This was reiterated by another parent:

'I'm exhausted and fed up with people making assumptions and referring to 'dad' and having to constantly explain there is no dad there are two mummies.'

Parents acknowledged that the impact of the Project cannot be underestimated or undervalued in terms of reduction of isolation and exclusion. It offers 'comfort' and 'acceptance.' Children see others with the same family as theirs and this is important as they wouldn't otherwise.

Reduced isolation is mainly evident through the strong peer support the Project offers participants. Some members of the group were participating since their children were babies. Some described how they find it gets increasingly harder to engender a sense of belonging in

their children as they get older. The Project offers the opportunity to tackle this and to see families with a similar background to theirs. The children and young people do activities together and this helps them to feel included and to ‘belong.’

On another level, parents have the opportunity to share everyday life experiences and this, of itself, reduces any feelings of isolation. This is extremely important for some participants who experience isolation within their own families. One participant explained:

‘We had a recent bereavement in our family. I wanted to go to the funeral, and it caused a whole family uproar. I did go and sat at the back of the church. No one knew I was there. I was able to share this with ____ (Project Officer) and other staff members and friends in our group.’

For this participant, having the comfort and support of the group, gave her the strength to cope with a very difficult and challenging situation. Other participants described how they felt they had a network of support around them and that they had common life experience to share with each other. They valued this peer support in particular. One parent said:

‘The LGBT community is not easy to reach as a community and it is even harder for families. Without this Project it would be very very difficult for kids and families. Our child is the only kid in his school with two mummies. We are a very small minority often and that is hard.’

4.7 Inclusion

Parents indicated that they joined the Project to feel more included in society, to meet other people like themselves and, to take part in organised activities. They reported attending the family events such as the arts and crafts specific Pride related activities and events, games and films. All those consulted, as part of the evaluation process, said they had become involved in the Project to show their children that there were other families like theirs. One parent explained:

‘I wanted to give my daughter exposure to more diversity and to show her different families. This is really hard to get elsewhere. We wouldn’t really meet other families like ours otherwise.’

A number of parents said that there are not many same sex families in the schools their children attend, and they are often the only same sex family in the school, making it all the more crucial to have the Project to reinforce a sense of belonging and inclusion. One parent said:

‘I remember the first night we came to the group our son said: Oh he has two mummies like me. I always carry that with me as it let me see he was feeling we are normal.’

The parent added that their son had previously been saying: *'Why does my family look so different.'* Now he sees he is not the only child with two mummies. This is very important for his parents in terms of preventing feelings of exclusion or feeling different to other families. All the children enjoy meeting other families and having the opportunity to make friends and meet regularly. One child told her parents:

'Coming to the group is a bit like being a member of a club. I love the arts and crafts and doing the activities with other children makes me feel less different.'

Some parents referred to *'a lack of inclusion'* *'a lack of visibility'* *'a nervousness of school and engaging with teachers.'* They described how taking part in the Project made them feel more included and therefore more confident in managing the challenges they face. They learn from each other. They feel more a part of their community. The Project offered them:

'A nice free space to talk about all the things you are worried about and the challenges you face. It really helps us all with general mental wellness. To be honest it feels like a warm cozy blanket wrapped around us all.'

The warm welcoming, non judgemental atmosphere is greatly appreciated because it makes being involved relaxed and specifically makes it easy to connect with a common purpose. All of this engenders a sense of inclusion. One parent explained:

'Everyone is very down to earth. There is no pressure to perform. You can just turn up and be yourself. I always feel at ease. We can be really open and share our experiences. It is such a safe space and safety is very important for us.'

Emansating directly from this sense of inclusion comes a feeling of acceptance which is very important for participants. Prior to being involved many felt they were not accepted. They felt they should *'hide away.'* Taking part in the Project has removed that lack of acceptance and replaced it with *'belonging'* as one parent explained:

'Coming to the group has changed everything. I have realised that we are accepted and we don't need to hide away. We are not outsiders. We are normal and it is OK to be in a same sex family.'

4.8 Increased Visibility

There is significant evidence that families feel they are more visible as a result of taking part in the Project. This is extremely important to them and has made a huge difference to their lives. With this increased visibility comes an enhanced sense of belonging and an ability to tackle challenges as they arise. One interviewee explained:

'Often our families can be afraid to go out as a couple. Attending Belfast Pride events meant that they were more visible marching with Pride. It also showed the children that Belfast is accepting and affirming their identity.'

The Project offered enhanced visibility to the children, in particular, as they very often are the only same sex family in their school. This is very important for families as one participant said:

'Coming to the group for the activities lets my daughter be who she is. She knows she is the only one in her school but here she sees others just like us and that is very important.'

Taking part in Pride events was perhaps the biggest opportunity to enhance visibility for the families involved in the Project. For many it was a very significant step to march publicly alongside their community at Pride. For the first time in their lives, they feel they are: 'the majority' and not 'the minority.'

4.9 Improved Health & Wellbeing

The Project has clearly helped children and young people and their parents to feel better mentally and physically. This is essentially due to the sense of belonging and common purpose participating in the group has given them. Specifically, through reduced isolation, increased visibility, greater levels of acceptance and enhanced confidence, participants have indicated that they feel more supported, happier, more able to cope with adversity/challenge/bias/discrimination. There is strong evidence from participants that belonging to the group and, having the support of each other, is highly significant in improving their mental health and wellbeing. In specific individual cases participation in the Project has helped children and young people to overcome bad experiences e.g. in school, wider family life. Children and young people have missed attending when unable to do so for some reason and have enjoyed getting back to seeing their friends in a safe space where they are valued and respected. All of this highlights the importance of providing a safe space to come together. This enhances wellbeing generally and makes families more resilient and gives them a sense of value which prior to becoming involved was absent.

5.0 Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents Conclusions based on the findings of the evaluation. They are not presented in any order of priority.

- The Project has been successful in addressing all its objectives qualitatively on every level. Quantitatively the targets were essentially met n=91 in terms of direct participation but significantly surpassed in terms of indirect participation and wider reach.
- There is increased awareness of similar and more diverse family types.
- There is increased confidence to speak to others about being part of an LGBTQIA+ family both in relation to parents and children/young people.
- New friendships are being formed among the children and young people and their parents. Many relationships exist outside of the Project.
- There is reduced isolation, alienation and invisibility bringing increased inclusion and visibility in society.
- Children and young people from LGBTQIA+ families are more visible e.g. at Pride events.
- Children and young people are better equipped to deal with challenge/negative attitudes/bias/discrimination.
- Children and young people feel more positive mentally. They have learnt how to relax and how to cope better when stressed.
- Children and young people have gained confidence through acquiring new skills and knowledge together such as arts and crafts, mindfulness, meditation, Online safety, planting, cooking.
- There is a very useful legacy, beyond the life of the Project, in the Toolkit, which has the potential to educate, raise awareness and, provide support to relevant professionals working with children and young people, empowering them to respect and value themselves and others in society.

6.0 Areas for Consideration

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents areas for consideration in terms of securing funding for any future delivery of support for LGBTQIA+ families. They are based on the learning from Project delivery over the last five years and are not presented in any order of priority.

- Given the success of the Project and the requisite experience, knowledge and expertise of HERe NI, consideration should be given to focussing on securing new funding to continue support for LGBTQIA+ families.
- The experience of this Project delivery has identified challenges in engaging the older children at the same time as delivering activities which suit younger children. Consideration might therefore be given to having a specific focus on supporting the newborn to 8 years age group.
- The Toolkit should be widely distributed as a useful practical resource for organisations working with families.
- The awareness raising/training/support for relevant professionals in schools and other relevant organisations should be further explored with a view to identifying more effective ways to engage. The Toolkit, as a tangible resource, may be a useful conduit in this regard.
- Given the importance of having physical safe space to meet, new premises or different venues should be explored for meet ups in any future delivery, taking cognisance of the fact that it can be very noisy for children with autism and sensory issues.

Appendix

This Appendix presents a sample of comments gathered from children and young people and their parents. It is drawn from internal records and from the independent evaluation process.

'You (Project Officer) have been part of our daughter's life since she was a baby. So many lovely memories.'(Parent)

'Thank you for EVERYTHING you (Project Officer) have done for our family during the past ten years.'(Parent)

'We loved you (Project Officer) in Foyle and all the energy you had with the young people.'
(Parent)

'Lots of happy fun memories made for the kids over the years.' (Parent)

'We are going to miss you (Project Officer) so much.' (Parent)

'It was a great chance to socialise and I had lots of fun.' (Child)

'I like it when we are listened to.' (Child)

'I feel like the group is really mine.'(Child)

'It's always good to be with your all your friends in the group.' (Child)

'I think everyone should come to our group.' (Child)

'It was my first time and I really liked it.' (Child)

'We were able to give our ideas for the meetups.' (Child)

'I really like being with all the other families.' (Child)

'Having this Steering Group is a good way to share ideas about what the group needs.' (Child)